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[Jingle]

[00:00:08.890] - Amanda Stanley

Hello and welcome back to You'll Have Had Yer Feminism, the podcast series exploring 25 years of Engender's history and the wider women's movement in Scotland, with me, Amanda Stanley. Across the past episodes, I've been talking with a variety of inspiring and fierce women from across the women's movement, and from Engender's history. I've spoken with some of the founding members of the organisation, as well as from other organisations such as the Scottish Women's Budget Group, and also as heard in the last episode with Glasgow Women's Library archivist about the importance of documenting women's stories and histories. Coming up in this episode, we'll hear from my colleague Alys Mumford as she caught up with our friends over at the Refugee Women's Strategy Group, to hear about the challenges refugee and asylum seeking women are facing in Scotland today. As well as talking to the co-founder of Women 5050 and the Director of Equate Scotland, Talat Yaqoob, about their feminist activism and what they would like to see change in the future. The first part of this episode, however, takes me a ferry ride out West, into Dunoon, to meet with former Engender colleague Lorna Ahlquist, to hear about her route into the women's sector, her work around older and rural women's lives in Scotland, and giving voices to those who are often left out of the political discourse.

[00:01:32.140]
[Jingle]

[00:01:36.810] - Lorna Ahlquist

I came into the women's movement through personal interest, but more formally through being a Development Officer with Age Concern Scotland, and when a lot of the United Nations Decade for Women work was being done, there was a deliberate attempt to try and include visibility and statistics and data on older women, and build that. So I was hooked in, to do some work on that. Did that in terms of the gender, the first gender audits, and then did it in terms of writing sections for the Scottish Plan for the United Nations Decade for Women. And that's really where I came into it. But then I was part of the Scottish Joint Action Group, that was for the UN Decade for Women, and ended up as a representative for the Women's National Commission, the Westminster based QUANGO, and I suppose just sort of developed on from there. In a way, I sort of left older women behind a bit. But I did notice when I looked back at my CV that I ran the Older Women's Network for about two years, which was again an attempt to create a sort of feminist older women's network. There are in existence various things, but there was nothing really national. So it existed for a while, but then fell by the wayside. I think there's a stream of what I've done which has been around older women, a stream which has been around UN Decade for Women and things, and a stream that sort of led into Engender, which was when we amalgamated Scottish Joint Action Group with Engender. And at that point I sort of became more interested or more involved in things like Scottish Women's Budget Group, which was sort of very close to Engender, but separate. I became a Director of Engender at one point, I did some work as a freelance consultant at one point, and I also covered for maternity leave at another point. So I was an employee for a while, and the last thing I did with Engender was, as a freelance consultant on the Women into Public Life EU project, which was around 2011-12, which was about Argyll. I think I was asked to do that because I live in Argyll, and it was women on the edge of politics in a way, it was rural women in Ireland, North, South, and Scotland. So it was a pleasure to move around the Islands and Highlands here, working with women.

[00:04:08.610] - Amanda Stanley
What did some of that work involve?

[00:04:10.170] - Lorna Ahlquist

There was basically looking for and recruiting women who wanted to find out about local and national and European political systems, and how they could find out more and use them to increase their voice, and also maybe increase their own personal confidence and ability to work. But the key was voice. It was about - they might live on Iona, where there were some women on Iona, women on Mull, women around Oban. Do I know anything about the political system? Can I actually influence that at

my local level? Do I know anything about the EU? What links do I have with it? Just exposing them to that and letting them see it, and letting them be aware of what potential there is, and how they might reach to that, or they might bring that to them.

[00:05:08.490] - Amanda Stanley

I think that's something that's quite interesting, especially with the project that we've been doing, because a lot of Engender's history is centred around Glasgow and Edinburgh just because of, the majority of women's organisations or, things like protest, sites of protests that went on, or where the conferences took place in the early days. And so that project on public life, to be able to bring that to Argyll must have been quite interesting, when the report got put together to see the differences.

[00:05:33.000] - Lorna Ahlquist

I think it was. And I think it's always a shock. I mean, I know this area pretty well, but even though once you start moving around, you find out how hard it is to actually go anywhere or do anything. One of the things I did was brought some of the women to events in Edinburgh, and the logistics of it were really quite hard. I remember we had partners from Ireland and Northern Ireland and we had them over here on a visit, and they are rural and they were in the project because it's rural. But they were actually quite shocked at what rural meant here, because whenever they drive, they see houses. So I was a bit naughty, I did take them down every single track road [Laughter] that was out there. But, you know, the reality of it and going to the Islands and all that, the logistics of it, when I took women to Edinburgh, they didn't have ways of getting there easily. So I actually drove up and swept them up and came back to Edinburgh, but that took about a day, and it was hard to coincide that with the conference and what was happening, and get them there in time and get them back. And the timetabling of what happened at the conference, which was a sort of a project conference, was really hard in terms of these women and, you know, I had to get a place to stay and we found a place to stay where all of us could be. But the logistics are difficult.

[00:07:01.440] - Amanda Stanley

Thinking about back to the early days of your involvement with Engender, you mentioned that you chaired an older women group at Westminster. I kind of want to expand on that a bit, because a lot of the work that we do is predominantly through the Scottish Parliament now. And I think it might be quite interesting to kind of delve into what your experiences were of getting to go to Westminster, and to chair that group, and to see how that political system works, with like you said civil servants and Ministers and charity organisations and women coming in, compared to what your experience was around the first Scottish Parliament?

[00:07:38.370] - Lorna Ahlquist

OK, I suppose I didn't have a lot of details. I did that - was part of the Women's National Commission and part - and chaired that working group. But I didn't know how the rest of the system operated or not. But it was very much a far more established system, and a lot more what I would call dead-eyed politicians, who are just harder to impact on to. And I have to say some of the politicians just are very much about their political career. And some are more, far more open. The - it was really good working with the civil servants. It was a really good working group. It was great to have that level of support for doing something in a report, because it's hard work, being in Engender you get used to having to scramble around, do it all yourself, etc. And all those things, to have that kind of support was absolutely wonderful.

[00:08:45.450] - Lorna Ahlquist

I would say I know more about the Scottish system and there's far more openness. I don't know that Westminster had the same kind of flow between outside and inside that we had here. I mean, I think it was fantastic when the Scottish Parliament was set up, a big tragedy was we actually lost a lot of people from the third sector, and whatever, who went and started working in it. So you lost a lot of activists. But one of the great things was the secondments from third sector organisations into placements in departments. I think Scottish Women's Aid did a lot of that. That was fantastic. And it's not related to women, per se, but one of the best things I ever saw in the Scottish Parliament was when one of the early pieces of carer's legislation was done. The, basically, carer's organisations were just said, you do the legislation, you get on with it. So they were given that over. And I wish, I'd like to

see more of that, because I think it was quite rare. But they then came up with a whole lot of proposals and legislation which was then passed. So, that kind of openness and structure and flow was really, really important. And I don't think that would have happened at Westminster, even though we had that report and working group. And it was - the report was presented in the House of Lords, that's still not that more intimate flow, in between working and working alongside.

[00:10:25.560] - Amanda Stanley

Thinking of the Scottish Parliament, you'd mentioned about working with the STUC and Women 50/50 as a paid coordinator, working towards the first Parliament and getting women involved in politics. And a lot of Engender work is about encouraging women to see themselves as being able to contribute to that, whether that is running for election or whether that is even just encouraging women to vote, as simple as that, getting more engaged in their community. Something that would be quite interesting to hear from you is, what were your experiences of the barriers that you found in the run up to the first Scottish Parliament? Because there was a record number of women elected, and then that sadly dipped straight after?

[00:11:04.680] - Lorna Ahlquist

A lot of what I did was the publicity and campaigning. I think the barriers are often time and energy and money. You can do so much if you've got the resources. You can mobilise a lot of people, but it's just hard, hard work to get enough people mobilised and get that message out. I think there is, some people would say the 5050 campaign was peripheral to the Parliament, but it was incredibly important to do it at the same time and to get it in, because it's a new institution. So, you know, some people will never see that as important as just the politics or the political party or whatever, that's, you know, like the biggest means to the end is seen as that, as opposed to changing the culture and changing that. I think one of the things that we've maybe lost quite a bit at that point, we had such wonderful support from women academics. But academia is becoming so hard, it's hard for them to have the time and energy to give that. But I think we have seen things like GCal, sort of develop very, very strongly. There's more women, academics, there's more presence. Ailsa Mackay did such a lot and people like Angela O'Hagan did such a lot, to raise that profile and get that stuff on the agenda, because you need the research base. You need the research base to be able to argue the case and sort of dismantle some of the myths that are there.

[00:12:40.280] - Amanda Stanley

As Lorna explained, getting the message out and changing the culture in politics was a key part of the original Women 5050 campaign, around the formation of the Scottish Parliament. The Women 5050 campaign we know today still strives to change the pale, male, stale politics that we have grown accustomed to. And one of the key voices in this movement is Talat Yaqoob. Talat is the Co-founder and chair of Women 5050 and is also the director of Equate Scotland, an organisation that promotes and encourages the advancement of women in science, engineering, technology and the built environment. Here's Talat talking with Alys from Engender about her feminist career, and why elitism within feminism needs to end.

[00:13:19.430] - Talat Yaqoob

My involvement in the women's movement has existed for a long time now. Formally, probably when I was at Uni, is when it first started. I was part of the women's society, I was involved in student politics, and then therefore the student women's movement. And that was where I think it blossomed into me realising that you could be a full-time feminist. That's something that you could actually do. But as far as my feminism goes, that's existed for even longer, even when I was a teenager, learning, reading and most importantly, witnessing things, particularly being from a Muslim family. Learning a lot about culture, religion and patriarchy. I think that's probably where a lot of my feminism came from. At first it was just me probably rebelling and now it's here to stay. And so my involvement in feminism has been long standing. My involvement in the women's movement probably took a more formal turn when I started on the board of Engender, and once I started working in more activist campaigning roles.

[00:14:22.030] - Alys Mumford

And what do you think are the sort of biggest challenges facing the women's movement at the minute

in Scotland, or internationally?

[00:14:28.400] - Talat Yaqoob

A major challenge is that people think that the job is done. So I hear a lot about, you know, there's a women First Minister. So therefore, what more could you possibly want? Well, actually, quite a lot, because that is a very surface level achievement. And it's a lot on one woman's shoulder. One woman in a position of power, does not mean that power is equal. And how power is shared is a major issue. I think in Scotland, we like to think of ourselves as more equal and fair than we probably are. And particularly as a woman of colour, we are far, far away from it still, there's never been a woman of colour elected to the Scottish Parliament. And I think that is a deeper reflection of institutionalised sexism and racism that exists across society. And so we've got a lot to do, particularly in terms of women of colour, migrant women, disabled women, unpaid carers, the women who are often forgot about, when we talk about power. I want to see the movement get back to some grassroots. Sometimes, I mentioned, you know, being professional feminist can be a job, but it also creates a little bit of elitism within the movement. I am in it all the time. I find myself talking policy jargon and acronyms. And actually what feminism needs to be about is about women's lived experiences, what are women and girls going through in Scotland? Speaking a language that makes sense to them, and speaking in a language actually represents them, is really important.

[00:15:55.400] - Talat Yaqoob

I would like to see an intersectional feminist movement, from the ground up that is representative and truly, speaking about women of colour, refugee women, migrant women, working class women, disabled women, LGBT women, actually be there and speaking not just on behalf of them, but more readily passing the mic to them. So actually, even though there is a microphone in front of me right now, it's also my duty to pass it on to people whose voices don't get heard, because mine gets heard a lot. I'm bored of my voice. Where are the other voices? And it's my duty to pass it on.

[00:16:32.020] - Alys Mumford

I should say, in Talat Yaqoob credit, she did ask us to find someone else, but we were very insistent we wanted her to get her recognition. Is there anything else you want to say?

[00:16:40.090] - Talat Yaqoob

I think being a feminist, and being part of the women's movement, wasn't something that I thought I was going to do 24/7. But I'm really glad that I do do it 24/7. It's hard work. It can be quite isolating at times, you know, especially at family dinners [Laughter]. But it's important. It matters to me. It's part of my existence. My living and breathing is this. And I want to see more women do it, and particularly young women come through and and be part of this more. It's a joy. It's exhausting. It can make you cry. It can make you wonder why you're doing the things that you're doing, and society just needs completely destructed and started again. Which I am an advocate of. But on the whole, it is powerful, needed work, and it's a privilege to do it.

[00:17:27.160] - Amanda Stanley

Timeless words about the movement needing to focus more on passing the mic to platform women's lived experiences, is a feeling shared with not only Engender but also with women at the Refugee Women's Strategy Group. The final part of this episode sees Alys from Engender head along to meet with some of the women from the Strategy Group, and share a wee cuppa with some very chewy, sweet treats, and to have a catch up. Here, they discuss some of the issues facing refugee and asylum seeking women today, and what changes they would like to see here in Scotland. Here's Alys now.

[00:17:56.830] - Alys Mumford

We're here with the Refugee Women's Strategy Group, and it would be good to know a bit more about what that group is, what it does, and why it's important that there's a group for refugee women and why that's important.

[00:18:06.850] - Mubina

So this is a group of refugees and asylum seekers. Every member of the group represent different

communities and a different community groups. We've been working with this group for years now, most of the members, and we try to influence the policies, with our one strong voice.

[00:18:30.970] - Alys Mumford

Anyone else want to come in? Why are you involved, Binta, in the group?

[00:18:33.850] - Binta

Well, I'm involved in this group because I want to make asylum change for women. I want asylum changed for all the refugees in this country, especially the migrant minority, because we are all from different countries, who all have our different views and different way of working. Because I represent the Gambian Association, our group is really a big group these days because we do a lot and a lot of things for women. They have like 180 women. The children will be like, there's like 500 of us, because some have more children, because it's like I joined this group in 2011 and then I see the way the group is working. It makes me happy. And I'm still here working with the group, even though we've got, some of us got our status. We are still here, to help other people who come newly in the asylum process, to tell them where to go, to know how to go about with the asylum. Because as an example for myself, when I came here, I don't know what is asylum. So I don't want that to happen to other women who newly come in this country. That's why I'm in this group.

[00:19:48.660] - Alys Mumford

Mhurai, you've been involved in the group for quite a long time. Can you tell us about your involvement?

[00:19:56.110] - Mhurai

Me, I was involved in this group, I think when it was in 2012. I can't remember because it has been ages. Why I joined the group, it's like, I just want to help other people, who can't stand for themselves to be - to speak on their behalf, regardless of their colour or whatever. But we are doing I can say we are doing very well because we are working with the stakeholders, policy makers. We do meetings with them and we'll be arguing and fighting for asylum seekers and refugee rights as well. And we are happy because some of our efforts are being granted, and some we are still fighting until they have to hear us, at the end of the day.

[00:20:56.830] - Alys Mumford

Great. Binta, you mentioned there just some of the issues facing newly arrived women in Scotland. But what do you think are the biggest issues facing refugee women in Scotland today?

[00:21:10.550] - Mubina

So I mean, when somebody is new in here, it's completely, you know, like everything is strange for them, you know, a different culture, different people, they don't know about the services. They know nothing actually. They don't know about asylum to claim, asylum, but they don't know what asylum is, and how they have to go through it. So it's really difficult when somebody when I was new in this country, I didn't know who Scottish Refugee Council are, who British Red Cross are. And I was scared to go there to ask for help because, see, when they meet, you know, immigration and the same people are sitting in British Red Cross, or Scottish Refugee Council. So how they can trust on, you know, same - I mean I'm sorry to say, I mean but same - I mean, Scottish people. So they can't tell them exactly what's been happening in their lives and what they need help for, because that's a difficult process, asylum process. So, you know, as they question they are - and as they've been interviewed there, then it's really hard for them to trust on other people who are from the same culture. And then, weather [Laughter] is difficult too. You know, settle down, it takes time to settle down in this country. Yeah. And it used to be for all these things. That's why I'm also still - I started this group in 2009. I joined this. And that was a time when I couldn't understand the English of Scottish people. I mean, their accent. Yeah. And I couldn't speak English, and I have learnt a lot, I would say a lot through this group. It has given me confidence. It has given me awareness. I have I go through this group, I've made friends, I've made kind of, we are like a family. We trust each other. We spend time with each other, and we feel that there is someone who care about us. So, these kind of things.

[00:23:42.050] - Binta

We are working on to make asylum easy for women, asylum work for women. It's like, it's really - it's a really hard process because it's like we've been working all these years, for the policy maker to hear our voice. It's like, I don't know really what is happening. I wish they can just listen to our voices, to know how we are feeling because we are the people who know how we are feeling. We are the people in the asylum process or the people who work with the asylum seekers. They really don't know. They are just doing their job. That's really true. But it's we who are feeling the pain, it's we who knows how it is going, what we are going through. So to make asylum work for women, that's why all this wonderful women's strategy group, they are all wonderful women. They are all hardworking women, who have been working together for so long. Like my colleague Mubina said, we have our group from there, we take feedback from our people and bring it to the table, because they know us, they trust us, they can tell us anything. They can tell us how they are feeling. So from there we can take that feedback, then bring it to the strategy group. Then we can all sit and discuss to see how we can take it further.

[00:25:11.780] - Alys Mumford

Can you see some of the issues you've talked about, the issues that you think are important to refugee women? Do you see them being discussed outside the strategy group? Do you think people know about them? Do you think women, other women are doing enough to highlight these issues?

[00:25:25.060] - Binta

Where there is the awareness or ignorance, I will call it, because it's like people will look at you, say what you're going through, they wouldn't - they don't even if you tell them, some don't know what is asylum, they definitely don't know. I think there should be more awareness, because we are now in the community. We are sitting with the people. We are in this country. It's like we are all part of this country. It's like your neighbours. We're not even like, why do you come here? I'm just like, can you please stop asking me, why did I come here? This is my home. So it's like I'm like, OK, this is really, this is not something people know much about, but other people you explain to them they will understand, because they are working with asylum seekers, or they are working in the community, but it's really something really tough going on in this country.

[00:26:16.440] - Mhurai

Most of the people don't know, and I think they don't even want to know. Why I'm saying that is like because most of the panels where we go to the meetings, whatever, you don't even see an asylum seeker on that panel, there will be just - maybe Scottish, which they don't even know. When we are talking to them, they'll say, huh? So why are you sitting on that panel yet you don't know anything. Why can't you just put those who are in... to come on that panel for them? Because they know the journey, how it is done. You people you just want to be on that because it is refugees, asylum seekers. So you just want to fill that panel yourself. But yet you don't know anything about it. As we know, all we are not even omitted to come there. Put us there and we'll tell you the journey, so that all people come to know, gradually they will understand. But if you are you, what is asylum? Or if I can ask you sort of for that, if I can ask you what is asylum? You don't know. So why are you sitting there, and whom are presenting? Yet you don't know. You are just there because of money, and they're just taking that money for these poor people. Who doesn't know, and you don't want to put them there? That's my concern.

[00:27:48.780] - Mubina

We used to go to Scottish Government's meeting, and there were I think, more men than women [Sounds of agreement]. And we were invited there on every meeting. And where we felt I mean, where we felt we are not listened honestly, because we were there as Mhurai said, there were people who doesn't know about the asylum system, who doesn't know about asylum seekers. And if we - we tried to raise our voice again and again. But I mean, what's the point if nobody's listening to you? You know, I mean, so I think they put us down. There are some who understand us who know about, they've got sympathy. They, I mean, we - the organisation we are working with, like Scottish Refugee Council, British Red Cross, Engender and many more. I mean, not just in Scotland, outside Scotland as well, in England side. They all know about the asylum seekers and refugees and how they pass through this process. They've got sympathy. They are really working very hard with us. And because of them, actually, we are stand on this position today, I would say, because we had kind of like, we were in, I will say we were in good hands, you know. So that we could stand up and we made a strong voice

altogether, because we had support around us. So that's why we try to support new comers, new asylum seekers so that they know their rights. They should have awareness of the system and they should know where are those organisations who can help them.

[00:29:44.910] - Binta

Things are really not working in the way we want it, because we have things we've achieved. But it's like, what we don't achieve is more than what we achieve. And we are still working on it, to see how we can make this thing work for us, how we can make things work for the asylum. What it's like - it's really a tough job. If at all, they can just change the asylum system for us. I think that will really change a lot of people's life in this country.

[00:30:22.740] - Amanda Stanley

Thank you once again to all the women from the Refugee Women's Strategy Group, to Talat Yaqoob, and to Lorna Ahlquist too. In the next episode, I'll be talking with more fierce feminists from around Scotland about sisterhood, community and what visions they have for the next 25 years of feminism in Scotland. You'll Have Had Yer Feminism is hosted and produced by me Amanda Stanley, on behalf of Engender, and the music featured throughout was written and performed by Lauren Mayberry. You can follow Engender on Twitter at @EngenderScot, and be sure to click subscribe so you don't miss the next episode. To find out more about Engender's Heritage Project and the photography exhibition that accompanies this podcast, head to youllhavehadyerfeminism.com

[00:31:15.620]

[Jingle plays out]