

Patrick Fine: Hello, and welcome to the *Deeper Look Podcast*. I'm Patrick Fine, CEO of FHI 360, and today I have the great pleasure to dial in Katja Iversen, the President and CEO of Women Deliver.

Katja, this year, we've been taking a deeper look at the SDGs. So, I'd like to talk with you about the role of women and girls in achieving the sustainable development goals. Katja, welcome.

Katja Iversen: Thanks. Thank you very much. Great series.

Patrick Fine: Katja Iversen is the President and CEO of Women Deliver, a leading global advocate for investment in the health, rights and wellbeing of girls and women, with a specific focus on maternal, sexual and reproductive health and rights. Katja has years of experience working in business, in nonprofits and with the United Nations.

Before taking the helm of Women Deliver, she was the Chief of Strategic Communication and Public Advocacy with UNICEF, and before that, she led the team responsible for advocacy and communication on reproductive health and MDG, the Millennium Development Goal 5 at UNFPA.

So Katja, whenever there's a serious discussion about women's empowerment and the role of women and girls in development, you're always one of the participants. You're right in the middle of those conversations. Can you tell us a little about yourself and how you wound up as one of the world's leading advocates for women's and girls' empowerment?

Katja Iversen: Thank you very much Patrick. I'm Danish, so I can't really take a compliment, so when you say all this, I get red ears.

But thank you, thank you. I have worked in development most of my life. And my path to getting into that was my grandmother. She was poor but fought hard for women's rights, including reproductive health rights back in the '30s when that was not very popular.

So, I had always in my childhood home been instilled with a sense of equality and that even though I was a girl, I was just as good as all the others, and I could do what I wanted if I worked hard to get it. And grandma really, really instilled in me the need to always

fight for women's rights, because if we don't, they will be overlooked.

Patrick Fine: So, let me ask you about that issue – gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. So, unlike the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs have a standalone goal on gender equality. And my question to you is: Is that a step forward or a step back?

Katja Iversen: It is always very interesting to hear gender equality be defined as a single issue. I would say it was an overarching and ever present issue. Mainstreaming an issue and having a single goal in the SDG [are] not mutually exclusive. We look at the all the SDGs through a gender lens, and that's also one of the big discussions on the indicators, that all indicators need to be gender-disaggregated, because so far, they have not been. So, having an SDG that talks about gender equality, but also has health elements like sexual reproduction health and rights, and then looking at the other SDGs, whether we talk about water, whether we talk about inequalities, whether we talk about health, education, all of that needs to be looked at through a gender lens as well.

So, looking at the SDGs, it is not a menu, it's a roadmap. It is not as if people in countries can pick and choose, "Oh, I'll take that delicious one, but I'll leave the rest." It's a comprehensive plan. And women and girls make up more than 50 percent of the world's population, so it's not a single issue, it is more than half the population, and of course we need to look at all the SDGs through that lens.

Patrick Fine: I'm really happy to hear you say that you don't see mainstreaming or having dedicated activities as mutually exclusive, because in my experience, I've seen both approaches produce benefits. Both approaches [are] necessary in order to get to the ultimate objective of women having more economic agency, more political voice and an ability to play a more active role in their communities.

The SDG is gender equality, that's the actual goal. Can you explain the difference between gender equality, gender equity and women's empowerment? I hear these three terms used often almost interchangeably.

Katja Iversen: Well that's a good one. I should have brought my dictionary. It's not something we dabble in.

From Women Deliver's stance, we look at it this way.

Women deliver, and much more than babies. So, women's empowerment, or giving power to women, or women taking power and, and having agency is absolutely key if we want to see progress in the world.

Equality, whether it's between genders, whether it's between races, whether it's between north, south, east, west, is core and key in the sustainable development goals. Having daughters have the same opportunity as sons, treating them equally by giving them the same access to health and education -- whether that's equity or equality I don't really care, but it's the right thing to do.

And really, positioning for girls and women to really live their full potential and not be secondary citizens is what we find as being the key issue.

And that takes extra action, because let's just face it, power today is in the hands of men. And if you see companies or organizations or governments where men are in power that's, that's considered normal. So, it takes extra consideration to really look at it through a gender lens. It often is looked at as a women's problem. It is a societal issue that needs to be tackled as such.

Patrick Fine:

So, then, in terms of achieving that goal, what do you see as either the principal obstacles or the principal actions that we need to support?

Katja Iversen:

The sustainable development goals are a big framework. It's a beautiful vision. If we hone in on the gender equality goal, it takes actions by everybody.

Right now, national, sustainable development plans are being made.

And what we can see is that some countries say, "Oh, we'll take three, seven, and ten," but that's not how you should go about it.

We saw with [the] Millennium Development Goals that the issues concerning girls and women were often left out. And if we look at it as the sustainable development goals being one big buffet of choices, a buffet of targets, we need to make sure that the ones relating to gender equality, the ones relating to girls and women, are not just left on the table. They really need to be picked up and

be championed.

So, that's why government is in the national plans, it is by businesses because we are all – you know women are producers, reproducers, consumers, and voters, but really also in businesses, the gender bias that we see there, we need to tackle, and that's both in the hiring and firing and promotion and empowering. It's in organizations, it's in schools, it's at every single level of society that we need to look at it through a gender lens and [give] priority to girls and women because it's the right thing to do, because it's the fair thing to do, but also because it is the economic sound thing to do.

We really know now, we have the evidence, that investing in girls and women creates a positive ripple effect that will both benefit the economy, the families, the societies and the individuals.

Patrick Fine:

You're right, the evidence is super clear, if you look at countries that have moved up the income ladder and achieved higher standards of living for their people, the one factor that's present in every country that has come out of poverty and raised the living standards is the increase in the role of women in economic activity, the increase in the levels of education of girls and young women, and the decrease in total fertility, so the total number of children that each woman has. So, that evidence is irrefutable showing that when women have more agency, when they are recognized in the society as equal actors both in the economy and in the political life of the society, that societies improve in terms of living standards, in terms of the health status of the people, in terms of the opportunities that are created for both boys and girls, men and women.

Katja Iversen:

Absolutely. And if I may just add one thing: One of the absolute key things is also health. Women's ability to control her own fertility, a woman's ability to control her own fertility is absolutely key in economic progress. We see it, as you said, you know, it correlates with the number of children a woman gets. But that's not by chance, that's by choice. So, women having access to contraception, to control their own bodies, to decide when and if to have sex, whether and if to have children and with whom is absolutely core.

Patrick Fine:

And that tends to be the most controversial topic. It seems like as humans, we just have such a difficult time with anything that

touches on sex. If you want to simplify the social debate around women's empowerment, very often, it comes down to this point you've just raised, which is women's control of their bodies and women's control of their fertility, of being able to decide when and if to have children and how many children to have.

Katja Iversen: Yep, it sure does. And, and we can talk about the benefits of gender equality and getting more women into the workplace and education and all of that until the cows come home. But let's just face it: A girl who gets pregnant at 14, the chance that she's taken out of school and will not get a job is absolutely humongous; so are the risks that that happens.

So, I know everybody likes to talk about the benefits of women in the workplace and girls' education, but we just can't not look at what that actually takes. Sex, in many places, is not a choice, it is a duty, and it's not something, it's something that is, you know, that you do and often under violent circumstances.

Patrick Fine: Right. Also, it's often so tied up with the notion of the identity of being a woman. So, in my experience, I've been in societies where young women were thinking to have children because that was how they validated their own identity as women. So, that gets into a whole set of cultural norms and definitions that influence how to address this question of actually achieving gender equality.

Katja Iversen: Mm-hmm, yeah, and it's very much linked to women being considered property of men as well.

Patrick Fine: Sure.

Katja Iversen: Yeah, there's a lot of underlying factors here, and that's also what makes it very interesting. So, let me ask you a question Patrick if I may.

Patrick Fine: Okay.

Katja Iversen: Because when we talk about gender equality, as I said, it's not a woman's problem, it's a society problem, and it really much needs the involvement of men. You know we're not going to fix this unless men get involved and really take it on as well. So, what would you say to that? What [do] men need to do here?

Patrick Fine: There, I think that it has to do with, how do you change people's attitudes? And again, I think that's tied up with how people identify

their role in society. If you don't address issues like machismo, or the sense of being manly is equated with the number of sexual partners you have, then you're not going to be able to advance economic empowerment or advance a different way of seeing the role of women in society.

I think the only way to do that is you have to start when children are young to shape views about what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a man and that that is not in conflict with viewing girls and women as equals, and it does not require a sense of either male superiority or male sexual prowess.

I actually think that some of that is biologically linked. I mean. it is wired into us. One of the reasons that it is a fundamental issue that is so difficult for societies to change even when societies express their desire to have more equality, their desire for women to have agency and a political voice, is that somewhere in our human being-ness, there is some instinctual kind of wiring that reinforces these roles, and that it is tied up around sexual roles and sexuality.

But that might be a controversial view. What do you think of that Katja?

Katja Iversen:

I think it's very interesting. If I may just go back to my grandmother. If you look at Denmark back when she was born, she was born in the year [when] the women in Denmark got the right to vote. And that's, yeah, it's a hundred years ago. And if you look at the society back then and then today, it is fundamentally different, particularly when we look at gender equality.

Some of that has had to do with a really concerted effort by the state, but it also has a lot to do with the economic disparity that's seen. Denmark is not the most equal country in the world, but you know, women work almost at the same level as men, and men take almost as much housework, unpaid care work as women. Economically, women are still making a bit less than men, but it's catching up.

Some of it also has to do with quotas. If we look at society today, what gets measured gets done, and when we see in companies, for example, but also government, that put some quotas down on female representation, it really changed things, because the role modeling changes. If you never see a firefighter being a woman, if you never see a doctor being a woman, if you never see a prime minister being a woman, you don't think you can become that if

you're a woman. So, it's also what you see and what you measure.

Patrick Fine:

Yeah, you're describing progress over a hundred years and moving from what we might call "traditional roles" of women basically as the caregivers in the family and as producers, but producers at home, to women entering the formal workforce taking on professional roles and really being now economic competitors with men.

I think part of, another part of, resistance that we see in societies that is often implicit is just a desire to limit competition. When women come into the workforce, suddenly now men have another half of the population that they have to compete with, and now they're competing against a whole new group of people who may be smarter and more skilled than they are. So, I do think that there's an economic competition aspect of this. And in the case of Denmark, and I think you could say the same thing about the United States, there's been a lot of progress in legitimizing that competition. So now, at least here, there may still be progress to be made, nobody really questions the legitimacy of women to being in professions or of women to lead organizations, of women to be in any leadership role in the society, it's accepted as a natural thing.

Katja Iversen:

I don't buy this competition analogy. It is a very male way of looking at it. It can easily be a win-win. Women in the workplace doesn't necessarily compete with men. You know the, the latest McKinsey study shows that if we have equal representation of men and women in the workplace, if we have gender equality there, we would stand to gain at [the] global level \$28 trillion in global GDP.

From my point of view, that's a win-win, that's not a win-lose.

Patrick Fine:

I recognize that, and that reinforces the evidence that shows that as women become more productive actors in an economy, those economies prosper, and countries come out of poverty. But I still think that within societies, part of the resistance to women playing more active economic roles can be come down to men trying to preserve their economic position in the society.

Katja Iversen:

Some of the conflicts can come from changing gender roles. That's men as the breadwinner who takes care of the economy and the woman as taking care of the home front. Of course, that is very changing gender roles, and that can be a change, a different change is difficult. But I'm also pointing to you [to] see a change coming,

in a concerted way if you want it.

If you say, "This is biologically defined, let's keep that," then you won't see change.

I think there's a lot of great opportunity for change right now that will benefit everybody, and on the gender equality front, because everybody wins. We know that women invest more in their families, health and education and prosperity than men do, so you actually see that's where you break the cycle of poverty, that's when, when women get fewer children, they invest more in the children, they invest [in] the children's education, and that is one of the keys to break out of poverty.

You'll also see it in the macroeconomics, and you see it in north and in south. If you look at a country like Rwanda, where you have seen a tremendous increase, there's more female parliamentarians today than there's men parliamentarians, and they are doing so well on most of the indicators both in health, in education and in general prosperity.

Patrick Fine:

Right. So, there again, that just emphasizes the fact that the evidence, what we can just observe, either through our personal experience or through looking at hard data, shows that gender equality or women's empowerment leads to reductions in poverty, higher living standards and more wellbeing in a society.

And you've described progress, and I think we can see progress. If I think of my own career over 35 or 40 years, I can see a real change in how we talk about the issues, the way the issues are legitimized, across the world. But what's your sense of how are we doing? So, if we look at SDG 5 gender equality, and you think about your experience over the last 20 years, how do you think we're doing as a global community in achieving that goal?

Katja Iversen:

When we look at how the world is going, I think we are seeing progress on many fronts, including with it comes to gender equality. We see more girls in school. We see fewer women dying in childbirth. We see more women have access to contraception. More women in the workplace. So, it's going in the right direction, but it is not going fast enough.

I want to point to two things that need to happen. One, we need to be better at measuring. We need to look at the indicators from the SDG and look at them through a gender lens. That is one of the

reasons why Women Deliver, Plan International, KPMG and a bunch of other organizations have gone together around a new initiative called "Equal Measures 2030," where we will track 60-plus indicators through a gender lens, because what gets measured gets done. We don't want to act on anecdotes, we don't want to act on hearsay, we want to act on evidence.

Another thing that's key, working together across sectors and across issues and across geographies will be crucial. Together, Women Deliver, FHI 360 and a very strong group have founded the Deliver for Good campaign, Deliver for Good, Deliver for Girls and Women, that focuses on 12 investments in girls and women that need to happen to power progress for all.

That cross-sectoral, cross-issue work is key if we want to see the change happen and break down the silos. It's a big thing, but it can also be difficult, because many programs are still so issue-oriented. So, we are breaking some really crucial ground here, and it's been wonderful to see how it is really gaining traction, the campaign Deliver for Good, and really getting organizations across the globe on board.

And the aim is to change the narrative around girls and women, from being vulnerable and victims, to be powerful and big agents of change, because that's exactly what they are.

Patrick Fine:

Yeah, I love Deliver for Good's emphasis on integrated development. And, as you mentioned, you've got to bring together health and education, and if you bring health and education together at an early age, then you're going to be empowering the person or equipping a person with the skills and the attitudes and the capabilities so that they can then become productive economic actors. They can then be informed political actors, and you then have a true comprehensive approach that is people-centered.

The fact that Women Deliver, along with its sponsors, including FHI 360, have initiated the Deliver for Good initiative to advocate and model and work on these comprehensive approaches, I think is an important part of realizing the SDG 5, because as you mentioned at the start of this conversation, the sustainable development goals are not a menu that you can take one or two off of, that there, it's a comprehensive approach toward social and economic development, and one has to take them all together in order to achieve the ultimate objective, which is healthier, more

prosperous communities in a secure world.

But let me ask you a question Katja: You've talked about the progress we've made. But, are you worried at all in the current political environment about retrenchment or falling back? Because to be honest, when I look at some of the political movements occurring today here in the United States and in Europe and in other parts of the world, I find myself worrying that some of the hard-won social gains, and, in particular, ones around women's empowerment, could be at risk. Do you see that at all?

Katja Iversen: I'm very worried. I'm very worried that the fight that my grandmother and so many other women have had and men have had to really gain traction on the different aspects of gender equality stand to be lost, and stand to be lost so fast. I'm worried because we see what has been built up can be torn down so rapidly. You know, gender equality is not a fixed issue that, "Well, we fixed that, let's move on to the next one." It is a continuous battle, a continuous fight that we'll have to continue, that everybody has to continue, because else it slips off the radar.

I'm very worried in this situation today when we look at it politically across the globe. Some of the conservative winds that [are] blowing really can undermine the gains we've seen over the last 10, 20, 50, 100 years.

Patrick Fine: Yeah, I share that concern.

Katja Iversen: It gives me hope that we have a framework like the sustainable development goals, that we have a global commitment, the goals and the targets, to really champion girls and women in the SDG 5, but also across the all 17 goals. People shook hands on that. Governments shook hands on that, and now we as a civil society and as actors have something to hold them accountable to.

Patrick Fine: Katja, you're right, civil society and the business community have very important roles in holding not only governments accountable, but themselves accountable, for ensuring that we don't lose momentum and that we don't go backwards and lose ground that we've already covered.

I think people sometimes think that progress is inevitable and that it is always in a positive direction, but history shows us that that's not the case. That in fact societies and nations can go backwards. And so, if anything, what we can see right now is that it is our

responsibility to maintain the progress that has been made, to be honest with ourselves about what remains to be done, and then to be persistent and smart about fashioning programs and initiatives, like Deliver for Good, to help ensure that we're continuing to move in the right direction.

Katja Iversen: Pointedly, women deliver, and the world needs to deliver for them and deliver for good.

Patrick Fine: What an interesting conversation. I knew it was going to be a terrific conversation.

Katja Iversen: I look forward to continuing it.

Thank you Katja, and thank you to our new and returning listeners. I hope you found the conversation informative. You can follow more episodes on the SDGs by subscribing to the *Deeper Look* podcasts on SoundCloud or iTunes.