

## A Deeper Look: The power of girls

November 2020

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[Music]

*Voiceover:* A Deeper Look. Exploring what works and what doesn't in development, and the changes we can make together to turn ideas into action.

*Patrick Fine:* While the world has seen significant progress regarding gender equality and sexual and reproductive health, it remains one of the most important and polarizing topics in development. Sexual and reproductive health problems are a leading cause of death and disability for women in developing countries, with young people bearing the highest risk of HIV infection and unintended pregnancy. The overlapping health, economic and social crises created by the COVID-19 pandemic have further restricted sexual and reproductive health services and disproportionately impacted women and their families. My guest today is one of the world's leading champions fighting for women's equality and economic empowerment, Dr. Natalia Kanem, the Executive Director of UNFPA [United Nations Population Fund]. Dr. Kanem, thank you very much for being on the podcast.

*Natalia Kanem:* Well, thank you so much, Patrick, for inviting me.

*Patrick Fine:* As head of UNFPA, Dr. Kanem leads the United Nation's efforts to uphold the sexual and reproductive rights of women and men. For my listeners who aren't familiar with UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, it supports access to a wide range of health and social services across the world. It's currently focused on three goals that Dr. Kanem set when she came in as executive director in 2017: Ending unmet needs for family planning, ending preventable maternal death and ending gender-based violence in all its forms. It says something special about a person when they are a world leader and everybody who has worked with them respects them and admires them. That really says something about the kind of leadership that you bring.

Now, this podcast this year is focused on trends that will shape the future, and when we started, we had no idea that the world would be turned upside by a global pandemic. Dr. Kanem, how do you see the impact of this pandemic on the work that UNFPA does, and how do you think it will shape your work over the next five years?

*Natalia Kanem:* Well, thanks, Patrick, and I'm delighted to be here with you and your listeners. The pandemic is a surprise in so many ways, that has brought out the best and perhaps has also showed us that we were not as resilient to the shocks as we might've imagined that we were. The observations that I have are in a couple of realms. First is, COVID did not end up being the

great equalizer, as we were wont to say at the beginning. What it did was it threw up all of the inequalities, all of the lacks, if you will, in the health system, but also in a broader social safety net system, which disadvantaged people who were already at the bottom of the ladder. So, initially, we saw that in terms of older people.

As you're probably well aware, the older woman is much more vulnerable, because she didn't have the pension, very often, she really didn't have her name on the property or whatever it would be, and in many countries, she wasn't in a position to show the resilience. So, the elderly have been affected. But then, as the wave continued, we've also seen a couple of things: a gender disadvantage, because women being 70 percent of the health workforce, broadly across the world, it's women who have been exposed, women who have not had the resources or the ability to manage home, family, work life. And then, the last point I'll make is that the pandemic shines a spotlight on what has been going on with racial disparities. Practically in every corner of the globe, it's been African descendants and it's been indigenous people who have been way disproportionately killed by the pandemic.

So, I think, speaking as a doctor and epidemiologist myself, health systems are not functioning the way that they should be. And moreover, that the health system, whether it's functioning or not, has some inherent biases that are implicit in how we've set them up, and this gives us an opportunity to change some of that.

*Patrick Fine:*

Are you incorporating actions into your objectives, the objectives for UNFPA, actions that will address health systems strengthening?

*Natalia Kanem:*

Great question, and the brief answer is yes. At the onset of the outbreak, UNFPA had to mobilize rapidly. As you know, ending death in childbirth is one of the main reasons that UNFPA is here, and so, we recognize the potentially devastating effect on a nursing workforce. Midwifery workforce — in some health systems, the midwives, for example, were not labeled essential workers, so we were scrambling to find PPE — personal protective equipment — when we heard reports of midwives using raincoats or garbage bags as their so-called PPE. But, you know very well that all the dots connect, so, UNFPA had to take advantage of our work alongside other UN [United Nations] agencies — I would name the World Food Program, of course the World Health Organization, the [United Nations] Refugee Agency — in order to be able to figure out the logistics, in real time.

Because all those supply chains, uh, you can imagine, got disrupted when

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the barriers to transportation went up, UNFPA had an advantage, because in our 150-plus locations, we've been on the ground for a long time. Our agency just turned 50 years last year, so we are partners of government in a very deep way. That helped. We also took advantage of our ability to utilize data to be able to predict where people were and also to be able to use our remote data systems, you know, because we work on census and population, to be able to identify who was likely to be left behind. But it's been a really tough road to make sure that the PPEs, menstruation supplies, contraception, all of the things that UNFPA does, has really truly been challenged by the pandemic environment.

*Patrick Fine:*

Yeah, we've seen that, as well, and in our organization, we face some of the same challenges with trying to ensure that our employees have access to PPE, because they're working in facilities on the frontline, providing a variety of health services. So, now, we're about seven months in to this. I've read that there has been a significant decrease in access to contraceptives, and we've seen in our own practice that many people who require health services are afraid to go to clinics or health facilities. So, there's just been a decrease in access, both because supplies are disrupted and because people fear getting exposed to the virus. How are you seeing that affect the work that you're doing?

*Natalia Kanem:*

Well, you know, Patrick, one of my worst fears has actually come to pass: UNFPA got busy and looked at models, and we predicted that, with everything that was going on with COVID, we might have an additional 31 million cases of gender-based violence for every six months of the lockdown situation. You know, women trapped, potentially, with an abuser, as you were saying, afraid to go out, the rules changing in terms of mobility. Similarly, for adolescent girls, we've had a big worry — girls not being in school, you're at home, you may be unsupervised, you may be at risk. And so, we have said that with everything that's going on, there may be seven million additional unintended pregnancies, and that's in addition, as you know, to the gap in family planning that our agencies together, in concert all around the world, our sector, has been trying to address. So, a lot of those extra unintended pregnancies may be young people; this is a girl whose life is going to be derailed.

And, as we think about violence, UNFPA, working with our partners — and UNICEF is a big partner in this within the UN, but also working with whoever we can all around the world — we've looked at the issue of what happens as a girl comes through her rite of passage and adolescence into womanhood. And, child marriage is a huge predicament for a lot of girls in the world today. Every single day, 30,000 to 33,000 girls get married under the age of 18, truncating her education, her economic prospects, and

also, just, you know, her sense of self. So, with the pandemic now, we're estimating an additional 13 million child marriage, marriages, over six months of pandemic.

So, we're well past that, now. And, we're also, now, looking retrospectively, and looking at whether or not some of this predictions came to pass. In terms of violence, it absolutely has, and now we're monitoring FGM — female genital mutilation — and child marriage, vis-à-vis the extra cases that have occurred because of the pandemic. In essence, I think we are anxious at UNFPA to be vocal and to be visible on these issues that may have been underneath the iceberg before the pandemic. But we can't allow the focus on the pandemic to just be on the virus alone. There are a lot of consequences, social consequences, that come out of the disruption that has happened all around the world, because of the coronavirus running rampant.

*Patrick Fine:*

Yeah, we see it as sparking overlapping crises, so, social crises, and you've just outlined part of that social crisis affecting sexual and reproductive health. It also affects education, there's an education crisis the likes of which the world has never seen, which has a disproportionate impact on girl children and adolescent girls. And, then, an economic crisis as the whole world economy slows down. And, we know that the brunt of that is going to fall on those who are least able to shoulder it. You mentioned, at the start of your comments, the disproportionate impact on the poor and the disadvantaged. Now, when I hear you talking about those very harmful consequences and the importance of not losing sight of these social and economic crises that accompany the public health crisis, it makes me think that there needs to be a call to action for the world community to come together.

And, I know that you just finished the 75th UN General Assembly, and that was the first virtual gathering [*laughs*] of the UN General Assembly, so, it was an extraordinary event in its own right. Was there a call to action to address what more needs to be done now and, uh, in the coming months?

*Natalia Kanem:*

Well, that's a great question, and I just have to say — and knowing, too, Patrick, that you've been in the busyness of the General Assembly over the years. You've seen the traffic, and just the heads of state with their entourages, and the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] who now have been, uh, steady companions to the process over the years. Well, this year was unique. Because of the pandemic and the related restrictions, there were no receptions, no handshakes, no milling around, and I think that energy and that human connection, the examples of the passionate

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speeches, were a little bit more difficult to replicate in that virtual space. But, there was a big advantage, because more people could participate, and more people could witness in real time, given the virtual space that we have this year.

And, I think it was a record-breaker for that reason, just in terms of the numbers of heads of government who participated and gave speeches and debated. And, it was a very rich and complex and multifaceted set of discussions. Of course, with COVID, many, many world leaders reaffirmed the importance of multilateral cooperation. The Secretary General, António Guterres, had led a process over the preparations for the 75th anniversary year to actually put out several calls to action based on COVID and also based on the urgency of ceasefire in wars around the world. And, with the World Health Organization, you know, charting the vision for where we were going with COVID, there have been a number of guidance reports.

UNFPA, for example, as a sexual and reproductive health agency, contributed to an important one: laying out the guidelines on how to address violence against women. Even with mobility restrictions, we want those shelters to stay open. When the hotline rings, we want someone to answer and to know, what are we going to do even if the person cannot immediately get out of a risky situation, et cetera. And so, I think the Sustainable Development Goals — and, you know, we're five years in, just one decade left to go — did give us a platform, even with COVID, to discuss certain calls. And, one of the calls for action was for the least-developed countries not to be left behind. For climate change, which is part and parcel, in a way, of a pandemic, because the ruptures in terms of the natural environment, some say, are related to viruses emerging out of wildlife, et cetera, that we might not have had otherwise. The Secretary General has put out a call, which, so far, over 130 member states have signed up for: the call for peace in the home.

I am extremely happy that our Secretary General, who calls himself a feminist after all, has asked countries to pledge peace in the home, anti-violence from intimate partners in the home setting. And, moreover, it was the 75th of the UN, lots to celebrate there, even in this year of trepidations. But as you know, it was also the 25th after the Women's Conference [The Fourth World Conference on Women]. So, led by UN Women, there was a rousing reaffirmation of that Beijing Platform of Action, which says women's rights are human rights. And, it also says that girls should not be left behind. And, you alluded earlier to education, and that was something that came up over and over again.

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*Patrick Fine:* You mentioned Secretary General Guterres earlier and his calls to action. And, I just wanted to say that he has stood out as a voice of moral clarity, over the last year, and he deserves credit for that.

*Natalia Kanem:* Thank you, could not agree more, thank you for saying so.

*Patrick Fine:* I saw that you attended the first International Women's Conference in 1975.

*Natalia Kanem:* [Laughs] Yeah, you know, it's amazing, when I think about it, because as you're probably aware, I had a medical career before going into philanthropy, and now, you know, to my surprise, as head of UNFPA. But, even as an undergraduate student I was really very curious about what ended up becoming this amazing movement of women. So, as I recall, I flew to Texas and took a train and a bus in order to get to Mexico City. It was nothing like the —

*Patrick Fine:* [Laughs]

*Natalia Kanem:* — women's conferences are now, but it was still amazing. It was also my first trip to Mexico, so, that was my first time seeing some of the contrast in terms of how women from all around the world join hands when you're called to do so. So, yes, I was there for that, and I was also in Beijing for the '95 conference.

*Patrick Fine:* Were you in Nairobi for the '85 conference?

*Natalia Kanem:* I was not. I was working as a physician, at the time. I was tuned in to it, and actually, it was imprinting even from afar. And, I think that's when you know a conference succeeds.

*Patrick Fine:* Mm-hmm.

*Natalia Kanem:* You don't physically have to be there, right? Those ideas should be ideas that travel, whether or not the person actually attends.

*Patrick Fine:* I think that imprinting ideas from afar is, is a powerful concept. Certainly, those international women's conferences did mobilize and galvanize consciousness around the need for women's economic empowerment, women's rights, women's sexual and reproductive health rights. If you go all the way back to Mexico City, there has been tremendous progress up to now. And, now we're in this inflection point, as a result, not just of the pandemic but, as you said, of climate change, of technological change, population growth, urbanization, these big factors that are affecting our

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society, that really put the work that you're doing right at the center of human development.

*Natalia Kanem:*

Well, you know to me, in all honesty, it is the adolescent girl today who is at the center of human development. And, what happens to her will be a litmus test as to whether we succeed or not. Gender equality really speaks to a better life for men, for women, for people who are not on the binary axis, and for all of us. The adolescent girl who today is the one at highest risk for death from pregnancy and childbirth, the adolescent girl who is today being much more infected by HIV. And, in fact, women's empowerment more generally really depends on whether she's gonna be educated, whether she's gonna have an aspiration to be the head of her village, or the mayor of her city, or whatever it is that she wants to do.

And, the stark harsh reality is, our research for UNFPA is showing that, in countries that we surveyed in the developing world where we work, it's only slightly more than half of women, 55 percent, who can make their own decisions about sexual relations, will I leave the house today and go to a clinic appointment or not, and contraception. It's also true worldwide, not just in the developing world, that one in three women is going to experience the trauma of physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. I mean, this is a crime. This is something that is so prevalent and is swept under the rug as, "Oh, well, this is, this happens. Keep it in the family." The ability of that adolescent girl to have a voice and to say no when something is going wrong that affects her is going to be, uh, really important.

And, let's not forget that COVID is showing something that was also there but not quite as in-our-face: On average, women spend three times as many hours on unpaid care and domestic work than men.

*Patrick Fine:*

Mm-hmm.

*Natalia Kanem:*

So, when we envision who's being privileged to be able to invest in themselves and their futures, it's still very much the case that the adolescent girl is vulnerable. So, I think the pandemic is showing us that gender equality is long overdue, and for me, it's an opportunity to act. Not just to sit in the corner and lament about how terrible stuff is, but to find other likeminded people who want to do something and to get the job done.

*Patrick Fine:*

You talked about adolescent girls, or just girls, having the aspiration to envision themselves in different roles and in, playing leadership roles. I think that is the key. I think that the way that one changes the world is if

you can change people's vision of what is possible. And, in terms of tactics for doing that, what have you seen that is effective?

*Natalia Kanem:*

It's been a very exciting time for UNFPA, because last year, uh, was the 25th of the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, that preceded the Beijing conference. And, as part of UNFPA's commitment to young people, we had, in essence, a series of worldwide conversations in people's home countries regarding their vision for young people in the future. We have the biggest cohort of young people in the world ever in history. It's absolutely massive, they're over a billion strong, and their access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, that's what's going to drive forward not just economic growth, but all the other things we've been talking about. The attitude of a young man to a young woman. The ability for girls to participate in sports, without having things like menstruation — a normal, natural, biological process — interfere with them being accepted on the court.

So, what I have really pinned my hopes on is those young people who are changing their own mindset, and who, in fact, are very committed to the Sustainable Development Goals ideas. They get it, that the dots connect. And, young people equipped to lead are a formidable force. We saw that in Nairobi, at the Nairobi Summit in November, when we celebrated 25 years since Cairo and the first International Conference on Population and Development. Which, in fact, connected a lot of the dots from environment, as we were speaking of it at that time, gender empowerment and the understanding that population is about human beings, it's not about counting only. Yes, you need to have census, yes, you need to have an idea of the contours of population. But, young people have to be equipped to make their own decisions about whether and with whom to get pregnant, start a family, have babies, et cetera, and how is that going to reinforce their ability to have a good life. So, for me the real ticket is not to work in silos. The elephant has the trunk and the right leg and the left leg and whatever, and, yes, we need experts who are skilled in each of these arenas. But, more and more, we have to link up. And, really, Patrick, I think more and more, we have to have a lot more frank dialogue.

The fact is, faith and religion is an arbiter of what's going to happen to a young person. So, as a scientist, as a doctor, as a reproductive health expert, how are you going to use normal, ordinary, regular language to talk to people who are really smart and concerned for their girl, but in their culture, in their family, they have always — fill in the blank. Right?

*Patrick Fine:*

Right.

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*Natalia Kanem:* So, for very sensitive, intimate issues like female genital mutilation, we have linked hands with religious figures, with traditional chiefs, with women leaders and with midwives, who tend to be very respected and, and well-intentioned in communities. We've had to leave just the health minister and become friends with the education minister, and certainly with the finance minister —

*Patrick Fine:* [Laughs]

*Natalia Kanem:* — to understand how investing in a girl can make a difference, not just for her life but her community and for the country.

*Patrick Fine:* I love the way that you have highlighted the importance of culture and connecting with cultural leaders at the community level in order to drive change that can be part of the natural evolution of cultures. 'Cause cultures aren't stagnant; they change over time, and they bring in new concepts, and then they acculturize them. I think that tactically, from a point of view of thinking what works in development, that too often, we leave out the importance of culture. To be honest, even in the response to the pandemic here in the U.S., I think one of the mistakes we make is we put so much emphasis on science without bringing in the cultural aspects, that we then give an imbalanced kind of response and that creates some resistance. In terms of promoting those aspirations of young people, to see the world and their role in the world differently, that's part of this cultural evolution. Do you think that the ubiquitous presence of technology, cellphones and the ability to communicate over distance is going to facilitate building those new aspirations?

*Natalia Kanem:* Well, I see that, in many ways, it has. But, I'm also very cognizant, because we do work with some of the poorest people in the world, that that digital divide, not everybody having a cellphone or the means to buy time, and then the leap to, are you on the internet, has a lot of variability. There are ways of trying to level that playing field that are going to be very important, especially for the education system, right now. Along with UNICEF, the whole of the UN is very worried about the digital platforms for education, and in particular, the isolation of girls who very often when they drop out, don't make their way back. The importance and the excitement of it is where you do have a lot of interest and talent. Young people are just absolutely fascinated with the new media, and they're using it in ways that we wouldn't have predicted, for the social good. So, that's been very exciting.

On the road to Nairobi, to the summit, last year, we took advantage of the

digital media platform to have a lot of exciting conversations with young people. The youth envoy of the United Nations has been really fantastic in terms of tying social media and the SDGs into locally rooted ideas as to what's gonna work in my own backyard. And, I've been very, very pleased to see young women's leadership in particular in all of these platforms, when it comes to new apps for sexual and reproductive health. As you know very well, young people are shy — and they have reasons to be — to come into the clinic and talk about sexuality. To say, "I would like a condom," or, "This is happening with my boyfriend, and I have no one to talk to."

So, in that space, we've seen a lot of innovation from young people to put quality, accurate sexual and reproductive health information in the local languages and make that available for young people. We also, as UNFPA reaching out to the private sector, have an important partnership with a group that's called Flo, F-L-O. They're based in Belarus, but it's one of the biggest health apps for women in the world, because it tracks your menstrual period.

*Patrick Fine:*

Mm-hmm.

*Natalia Kanem:*

And, these are subscriptions that working women, professional women use on this platform. But UNFPA has partnered with Flo in order to have a lot of good information about sex, sexuality, pregnancy, menstruation itself. And, now, young people have taken over a corner of that chatroom to have honest conversations about S-E-X. It's still very hard to talk about sex in most societies, but it is an arbiter of what's going to happen to that girl. If she is shamed for asking, or if she is coerced and has nowhere to turn, those early sexuality-related experiences can be very damaging over a lifetime. So, we hope for positive, healthy sexuality at a time when that young person is ready and well-informed.

*Patrick Fine:*

You're absolutely right about the taboos that exist around honest conversation around sex. And, I think part of that, in many countries, including here in the U.S., is tied to identity, to how we define roles in society. One of the things that I see is that the pandemic has accelerated a number of trends that were already shaping the future of development, and one of the biggest ones is technology, and you've just been speaking to technology. Where, over the last seven months, a large portion of professional work has moved online. And, people are working remotely, and they're mastering the ability to be productive and effective in a virtual workspace.

And, I'm hoping that that will help to address the issues of the digital

divide, that it will mobilize resources, so that youth in particular around the world, especially in low-resource settings, have access to devices and to the data packages, to the bandwidth. To be on the internet, not just with SMS messages but actually on the internet, and I think that we're seeing that. And, if we can continue that over the next 10 years, and really dramatically expand the access for youth to have access to the internet, I think that will revolutionize the ability to address issues like you were talking about around promoting the aspirations and the belief in the potential for playing new roles and achieving a better life.

*Natalia Kanem:* That's exactly what we want, and that's exactly what the world needs.

*Patrick Fine:* In terms of promoting the well-being of adolescent girls, the need to also include adolescent boys, that adolescent boys are an important part, how do, how do you look at that?

*Natalia Kanem:* What's really exciting about the time that we're in is that young people are transforming views of each other and of society. And, it's been a pleasure for me, using the avenue of sports, to work with young men who are really, really very committed to gender equality. We've seen movements, for example, in parts of West Africa, *Touch pas a ma soeur!* — Don't touch my sister! — where young men are standing up for that girl next to them in the classroom, for the girl in the neighborhood. In certain instances, in refugee camps, it's young men who are accompanying young women if there are issues of lighting when they need to walk around at night.

So, I see the positive spirit of young men all the time, and some of the most eloquent on how gender equality will make life better for young boys are young men themselves. And, they talk about things like machismo — in my terminology, coming from Panama — and how the expectation that you resolve issues by fighting is really damaging to the psychology of a, of a young man growing up. Now, the other aspect, though, and this is where I think we have to be very clear-eyed — we live in a world where the majority of decision-makers continue to be men, 80 percent, 90 percent, very typically. Whether it's a boardroom, whether it's a school principalship, even in hospitals, where women dominate as the workers, the leadership of the health system trends male. So, men have to be vocal in the equality discussion, just like boys. And, what I expect is for men to not only understand and nod, but to take action. When it comes to gender equality in schools, the expectation that a girl should not lose a quarter of her schooling because of menstruation becomes normalized. So, where is she gonna get the sanitary pads from? Who is going to help her to discuss something that may be taboo? Similarly, a president like Uhuru Kenyatta

of Kenya, a man, has said very clearly that he is going to end FGM in his country and put a timeline on it.

In Niger, the head of state there, also a man, has responded to young girls who were with me when we approached him, saying, in their own voice, “I don’t want to be married off when I am a kid. I want to finish my education, and I wanna be able to fulfill my dreams.” And, he has endorsed this. So, ultimately, I think the question of contraception is not entirely in a woman’s hands right now. This is something that is arbitrated with her partner — it’s the husband, it’s the father, it’s the mother-in-law, whoever it is. We need to make sure that women’s bodies are respected and that they can make these decisions, and that is a whole of society approach that’s gonna change that.

*Patrick Fine:*

Right, the idea of control over fertility, so, giving a woman control over when she has children and how many children she has, I think, is the very core of women’s economic empowerment, if you just wanna look at it from an economic lens. But really, of women’s equality. And, that’s a controversial notion, to say that women should be the controllers of their own fertility. And, I see that as one of the really major fault lines in development discourse, because of cultural issues, when you talk about some traditional cultures where that’s a very hard notion to accept.

*Natalia Kanem:*

Well, it’s interesting. UNFPA has been a proponent of a woman having control over her fertility, from the first day. And, in the Cairo Conference in 1995, the 179 member states who signed on to that proposition have been very, very important in the advances that we’ve made. So, why are we stuck in a time and a place where sexual and reproductive health should be an issue for debate? Women have been extremely clear that they want choices and their rights to be respected. We’ve also given a lot of time to understand the economic argument that, especially in a time of rampant climate change and all it means for developing countries — this is why the African Union, for example, is talking very openly about the demographic dividend of investing in the young people that you have, and allowing women to plan their families, the spacing, the timing.

And, whether, and with whom, for that matter, they wish to make babies. So, it’s perplexing to me, but I’ve also had to have the humility of understanding that that’s the way that it is, right now. The arguments about empowering a young woman with information about sexuality so she is not duped into sexual activity, so she is not married too young. Not just the physical readiness. We’re taking her off the grid in terms of what she could contribute, to make herself — and generations that follow her can be affected, for that matter. So, we are struggling, always, to explain

that very important concept, that my body is part of a young person's life.

And, you can't separate that without giving them factual information, age-appropriate, by people who can be trusted to give them the guidance that they need in a timely way. So that it's not too late, and so that we're not blaming the girl rather than preparing the girl.

*Patrick Fine:*

In terms of why are we still at this place, don't you think it's because you have, uh, big chunks of society, in, in, uh, you know, in many societies, that the men feel a fear of loss? Loss of control, loss of economic power, loss of political power. Because in the traditional setup, they weren't competing against women, they were able to call the shots. And, so, it requires men to give up some of their social power and economic power so that there can be equality.

*Natalia Kanem:*

Patrick, you raise a point, it's an important point. We live in a time of patriarchy, and that's, for now, the way that it is. The expectation is not that men will give up their power. The expectation is that women will be accorded full equal rights, and the demand is for women to be represented at every decision-making table that there is. So, in order to make this a reality, a girl has to be equipped to lead, and a woman's voice has to be respected. So, ultimately the question of power is absolutely at the center of the dynamic, and women who, as you know, are even slightly more than half of the world's population, are demanding equal power. And, that is what SDG 5, and in my mind, all of the Sustainable Development Goals, are based on.

So, reproductive health is an expression of that power, for the individual but also for the community. The ability to have leadership that is gendered — which a man can do, and our Secretary General is a very good example of that — must not depend on the whim or the kindness or the fancy of anybody. Women are fully equal, and the rights of women must be respected in every sphere, and the right to bodily autonomy is a very important cornerstone of that.

*Patrick Fine:*

Yeah, I agree, I think it's the foundation of it. So, we're at a period, right now, where we're seeing more humanitarian crises than ever before in the history of the world, more displaced people, more refugees. And, that puts tremendous pressure on meeting the needs of girls and women. How are you looking at that?

*Natalia Kanem:*

UNFPA is part of the humanitarian response around the world, with the responsibility for looking after reproductive and contraception issues. But, very importantly, also to dealing with gender-based violence in refugee

and displaced people settings. It's been extremely troubling to see that women and girls are doubly disadvantaged when they are refugees and now are victimized by violence.

In Rohingya camps, for example, I have also been told by so many women, over and over, that it is also not just the physical violence, but the wound of injustice that they want the world to address. So, UNFPA has joined with the Office of Humanitarian Affairs, led by Mark Lowcock, to raise this issue of violence against women in humanitarian settings. And, it was a subject of discussion, led by member states, just during the last general assembly of the United Nations. The ultimate issue is whether or not the seriousness of the needs of refugee women and girls affected by violence will be met by the investment that's required to prevent it. By things like lighting, paying attention to the path, literally, that a girl must walk to a latrine coming back, the aspect of social relations in the camp, and the ability to provide safe spaces for women to be able to come forward and report.

All of this costs money, and the woeful statistics on the underfunding of gender-based violence against women and girls in a humanitarian setting is very troubling. And, we do hope that member states will respond to OCHA's call in that arena. The other point that I will hasten to make is that there is an element of despair for young people in the camps, because there's not always a path out. So, the question of what happens as you grow up, and a lot of these humanitarian issues are protracted now, they're not over in five or 10 years. So, we're also paying attention to women's leadership in the peace and security front.

This year happens to be the 20th anniversary of a Security Council Resolution 1325, which says that women, peace and security must be addressed, in order to have lasting world peace. So, very important for us to reflect on.

*Patrick Fine:*

So, Dr. Kanem, let me ask you this. We're in the most disrupted year in our existence, at least the last 100 years of history. We have a global pandemic, we have a global economic recession, we have a social crisis. So, it is a trying time. And, we actually don't know how long we are going to be in these crises. I worry about our ability, as societies and as groups of colleagues whether at the organizational level or community level or at the broader societal level, to sustain the disruption, over a long period of time. Considering where we are right now, and thinking about the future, are you optimistic about our ability as a global community to overcome these challenges?

*Natalia Kanem:*

Well, count me in the team optimist [*laughter*], absolutely, I'm forward-looking. And, you know, I've been around for quite a while, and I have seen things change. So, from 1975, that first Women's Conference, to now, it's undeniable that there's a lot more to be done. But a lot has changed for the better. I have, lately, been quoting Octavio Paz, and he made the point that we must learn to look reality in the face. If necessary, we must invent new words and new ideas for these new realities that are challenging us. The poet, the writer, has said to look reality in the face. For me, that says we have to be optimistic that we will be able to name and change some of these conditions that affect women and girls, but, of course, affect society as a whole.

So, when we think about the human tragedy of son preference, of child marriage, of female genital mutilation, I just wanna go on the record that I am going to be optimistic that, by the year 2030, we'll be looking back and marveling that so much got done despite the pandemic. The pandemic is a challenge, and I don't wanna discount that it's made things harder, it really has. But, I prefer to look at the opportunity side. It's also laid bare a lot of the -isms that we weren't talking about as much. We've realized how closely connected we are, the one to the other. It's not one country's issue alone, it's not one state, it's not one community. You know, we really are linked together.

And, for health systems, we have a lot of good business to get busy doing. We also have to realize that the health system doesn't stand on its own, so what about those safety nets? What about the investments for one country reaching out a hand to another? The real panic that we have is that the humanitarian issues were growing even prior to the pandemic, and now we're seeing that explode in a way that's very, very disturbing, mixed in with xenophobia and name-calling that, "You're carrying the virus. I'm not." It's also been very sad to see that, on certain borders — and I would name the border between Venezuela and Brazil — UNFPA has had to open new clinics and work very closely for adolescents, for LGBTIQ people, who need their medicine and they're not able to get it.

And, just to help refugees keep their head above water during a pandemic. I mean, it's been a huge challenge for the United Nations. It's also been an important time to reaffirm that, when the UN was built, 75 years ago, it was after a huge world shakeup, that world war. And, now we see the wisdom in countries having a mechanism for the type of dialogue that we do, hopefully, to positive action. Or, at the very minimum, prevent exacerbation of war and conflict. But, I think this is a time for countries to also start thinking about that world safety net, that vaccine that needs to be

equitable in its distribution, and a whole range of other inequalities, as well.

*Patrick Fine:* You point out that the pandemic is showing us new pathways, new ways of seeing, where there are real opportunities that we can see ahead of us. And, I love the way that you characterize your own approaches, recognizing the challenges but looking for the opportunities. This conversation really makes clear, from the very beginning, that you are an optimist, you do see the potential for good, and that you're one of those people who brings new ideas, and who creates new words, who names what the future can be. And, I want to thank you for that, and thank you very much for participating in the podcast today.

*Natalia Kanem:* Well, thanks very much. I'd like to thank my team, because they're the source of a lot of very good ideas, and they're just the most dedicated people that I've ever met. It's a pleasure to be with FHI 360, and it's been wonderful speaking with you.

*Patrick Fine:* Listeners, Dr. Kanem has given you a lot of food for thought in this episode, and a lot of insight into the strategies, policies and tactics for promoting women's equality. I'd love to hear your thoughts on what we've discussed today. So, add a comment, rate the podcast, and join us next month for the final episode in this year's *Deeper Look* podcast, where we'll review the year and look ahead.

Thanks for listening.

*[Music]*