

Oral History with ElsaMarie D'Silva

Conducted by Maggie Lemere

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ElsaMarie D'Silva talks about her switch from the aviation industry to a social entrepreneur tackling gender-based violence in India through her company Red Dot Foundation and its SafeCity platform which collates location data on sexual assault. As an agent of women and survivors' rights, Elsa talks about her own experience with sexism and gender-based violence and how she was inspired to act. She also talks about strategies for implementing social change through entrepreneurship and applying her knowledge from the aviation industry to her work.

Keywords: Indian women activists, women's rights, social entrepreneurship, anti-sexual harassment, social entrepreneurship, women, gender-based violence, aviation

Regions: India

Maggie Lemere:

This is Maggie Lemere, and I'm here with Elsa D'Silva. The date is Friday, October 2nd, 2020. We're speaking from India and the United States. Elsa, I need to actually know where you are in India. I'm really honored and excited to have Elsa with us to share her life story and her journey of change-making and peace-building and social entrepreneurship, and her perspectives on working towards peace and security for women in India and beyond, as I know your reach has been. Elsa, thank you so much for giving us so much of your time. We're really, really grateful for you joining us today. Maybe we'll start by just having you tell us a little bit about yourself and where you come from.

Elsa D'Silva:

Thank you, Maggie, for having me on the show. I'm really thrilled to be part of this project. I'm ElsaMarie D'Silva. I'm the founder and CEO of Red Dot Foundation and I'm based out of Mumbai, India.

Maggie Lemere:

Great. Elsa, for Oral Histories we're a little bit conventional and we love to start with where people were born and where you grew up, and your childhood. Will you tell me about where you come from in India and what your childhood was like?

Elsa D'Silva:

I have always lived in Mumbai. Actually, I've lived in the same apartment all my life, in the same suburb. My suburb is called Four Bungalows and that's because Mumbai or Bombay, as it was called then, is an island and it's reclaimed. There are seven islands and there's a lot of reclaimed land. My suburb was one of those reclaimed [2:00] pieces of land. Initially, there were just Four Bungalows when my father moved here. Yeah. I've seen the suburb transform from a sleepy little one into a very vibrant one, which is the hub of the television industry in India, as well as it's now one of the aspirational neighborhoods to live in. I've lived like I said, all my life in Mumbai, but I grew up in a very sheltered home. My parents were very liberal, but also conservative in some aspects. I'm born a Roman Catholic, so conservatism is part of the religion, but otherwise, we were far more liberal in outlook and in the way we experienced and lived in society. I say this because it's important to my work later on at Safecity and the options and choices I made in my life. When I was 19, once I graduated, I joined Jet Airways, an airline which was initially domestic and then went international. I started my career as a flight attendant and over an 11-year period with Jet Airways, I moved through various roles. I was a flight safety instructor where I taught pilots and cabin crew safety and emergency procedures. Then I was headhunted to join the strategic

side of the business, which was revenue management. [4:00] It was fascinating because I never really knew that side of the business existed. It was all about risk-taking and making bets in a way, revenue management, or selling ticket prices at the most optimal price. You had to make calculations and there was some art to the science too. Then after Jet Airways, I was headhunted for Kingfisher Airlines, a new startup, and once again, I climbed up the career ladder very quickly. I ended my stint with them as vice president of network planning. Over a 20-year period between these two airlines, I had a lot of fun. I had a lot of learning and an exciting career journey because I've tried many different things. I also grew as a person because I had mentors along the way. Of course, I had bad bosses, like many other people, but I also had mentors and coaches who always saw potential in me. In fact, all my promotions; they identified me for that higher role, more than I felt I was ready for it at that time, which again says a lot about women in leadership positions. We don't take many risks, but here I was gently given a push many times during that career. Now, when I look back, I realize all of those experiences have helped me in my work at Safecity in trying to make spaces safer for women and girls, but also building their confidence and strengthening core systems so that women and girls can achieve their potential.

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah. What a journey? You said you grew up in a more conservative Catholic household and that [6:00] came to influence your work later on. I'm curious when you were a little girl, what were your hopes, your expectations for your future? Were you interested in aviation or did you have other ideas of what you wanted to do?

Elsa D'Silva:

Thanks for asking that question. It's a very interesting question. Yes, when I was growing up, I found my space very constrained. I don't remember exactly why, but I felt like there was a larger world out there waiting for me. I didn't fully understand it. It's only now when you look back on your life and you realize that you wanted to achieve much more than what people were expecting you to believe or achieve. When I was growing up, when we would talk about careers, my parents never really put any restrictions or forced us to think in that sense, but it's like what you see is what you believe, right? In a way, when it comes to role models and all these things around you. I was in a very middle-class neighborhood and a very middle-class upbringing, so obviously I had not seen all the ambition that is possible in a way. I guess, intuitively I knew that I was meant for bigger things and that I wanted to stretch myself, do more.

I was fascinated with aviation because several members of my extended family worked with airlines and I was envious of them, they were traveling all over the world. I'm talking about like 25/30 years ago when air travel was not so popular in India. In those days when you had to travel outside of the country, you had to actually get foreign exchange

[8:00], and that foreign exchange would be listed on our passports. You could only take up to a certain amount, and it was seen as very elitist to travel outside of the country.

For me, watching these relatives of mine travel the world and go to all these exotic places, meet people over there, have different foods, was so fascinating. I wanted to be in their shoes. Therefore, all I could remember was, I needed to get out, and I thought of joining the airline industry because I felt it was a way out. To be honest, I never really thought that I would join an Indian carrier, a domestic carrier, and continue my aviation career within India. I always thought that I would join a foreign airline and be based outside of the country. That was really what I was planning, but as fate would have it, every time I applied for a foreign airline, for some reason I never got through, but the domestic airlines that I applied for, actually the only one that I applied for, was Jet Airways and I sailed through even though I failed miserably in all the interviews, in my opinion.

Maggie Lemere:

That is so interesting. I resonate a lot with your interest in the broader world. I did not grow up in a big city. I grew up in a small town, but I still dreamed of traveling to other countries and was deeply curious, which it sounds like you were too. I'm curious, for you as a child, what messages about gender or what expectations you had around being a girl. Then growing up as a woman in India and yeah, just anything you would want to add about any messages maybe your parents gave you or what your household was like in that sense.

Elsa D'Silva:

My family, [10:00] as I mentioned, is a middle-class family. My father worked in a bank and my mum was a teacher. Unlike other mums, most of my friends' mums didn't really work but my mum was a working mum. Actually, it made us very independent because while she was away at school teaching we had to fend for ourselves. Yes, we did have a maid when we were growing up for part of the time but for the most part, we didn't have a live-in maid. We had to get back from school, warm up our lunch, eat it, then go off for our extracurricular activities, et cetera. When my mum got back from school, we would come back home and then finish up with our homework, watch some TV and then go back to bed. It was a pretty routine life in a way. What I noticed was that because my mum was a working mum, we weren't pampered. We were actually quite independent, and all of us. I have a younger sister and a younger brother, and all three of us were pretty independent. We would do our own housework, which may sound a little strange to you because in India if you are even from a middle-class family you normally have a maid. You don't tend to necessarily do the household chores. Somebody does it for you, but we were made to do it and we did our share. It wasn't a gendered role in any way. Also, because my mum was a working mum, she didn't cook twice, which is, again, a

very Indian thing to cook fresh before every meal. What was cooked in the morning was eaten in the evening as well, and we never complained. What was put in front of us, we just ate. It could also have been something as simple [12:00] as sandwiches, which some of my friends never really believe that we could eat sandwiches for dinner, but for us, it was very normal. It would really depend on my mum and what she felt she wanted to put on the table that day. Then, my mum and dad had a very difficult relationship because my dad's an alcoholic. At some points, he would get very violent. There is a period in my life where we walked out from the home just because the violence had become a little too much to handle and my mum was fearful for her safety and ours. That whole experience also had a great imprint on my life for the future when I started Safecity. That I watched my mum because she was independent, in the sense she had a job and she had access to finances and a supportive family. Her family was extremely supportive. We didn't suffer in the sense we had a roof over our heads as an alternate accommodation, and we were allowed to continue with our routine in as normal a manner as possible. That would not have been possible if my mum wasn't financially independent, or if she didn't have a supportive family. To me, that has been my driving force for a long time, that if a woman is financially independent, she can make choices and she can decide for herself, and if she has children, what is best for them. Early on, not only was I curious about the larger world and wanted to experience it and to travel and get out of the small bubble that I was in, but I wanted [14:00] to become financially independent as quickly as possible.

Maggie Lemere:

Wow. That's so impressive. I wish I had had that awareness when I was younger, around becoming financially independent. My mum was a teacher and a single mother, so I had a similar childhood of needing to be somewhat independent, but also seeing how hard my mum worked and I had so much respect for her. Yeah. I guess, going forward into your career, and you went through all of these promotions and such over, you said 20 years, what was your life like at that point? Were you happy in your career? Did you feel satisfied? What were your goals? You were living in Mumbai, what was your day-to-day life like working in the airline industry?

Elsa D'Silva:

Like I mentioned earlier, I wanted to fast track my financial independence, right? Joining an airline was actually a lucrative career option because as a flight attendant you got paid quite a good salary. That's why I joined the airline industry. Like, I also mentioned that I kept getting promotion after promotion. You won't believe, with every promotion I actually lost a bit of my salary rather than an increase, because as a flight attendant we had various allowances, and every time I got a promotion, one of those allowances got dropped from the overall pot, which kept my salary stable.

In hindsight, a lot of my friends did not opt for those promotions because they were only looking at the short-term [16:00] regarding their salary. I was, I think, smart enough to understand that, yes, I wanted that financial independence, but what about a career option? Because I couldn't be a flight attendant forever. When these options were offered to me by my bosses, I grabbed them with both hands. If it were left to me to pick them without somebody nudging me, maybe I would have still been a flight attendant. But because I was nudged and I'm smart enough to recognize the opportunity for what it was, I took it and grabbed the opportunities. Over a period of time, the salary did go up exponentially, but in the short-term, it was stable with every promotion. I say this again because women don't take risks in life. That's another thing that we have to work on because we are socially conditioned to not take risks. It's important for us to observe what other people are saying and the cues that they are giving us. Also, be smart enough to think for ourselves, what are the long-term goals?

Financial independence was critical because I already told you that my mum went through this and we went through it because of her, but she was able to provide for us. So very early on I invested in an apartment and subsequently a second apartment so that today when I'm doing this work in a way I get rent from my apartment. It's a supplementary income in a way that supports me whilst I do my social work. Having said that, the 20 years that I spent in aviation were absolutely phenomenal. I enjoyed them. I had a lot of fun. I made great friends. I had great work colleagues, both the airlines were fantastic. They [18:00] were always in the top 10 airlines in the world. I'm really lucky to have worked with those two companies, but I've worked like crazy for those 20 years. In 2012, I found myself burnt out in a way. I felt I had exhausted my options and reached a glass ceiling within the industry in India. I really didn't want to be in the corporate rat race anymore. I wanted to follow and find my purpose, except I didn't know what it was. I always say 2012 was a landmark year for me because Kingfisher Airlines went through a financial downturn and eventually shut, but during that time I was asking myself a lot of questions. What do I want to do for the next 20 years of my working life? It didn't seem like I was ready to invest another 20 years in the private sector where I was working crazy hours for somebody else, and it was volatile enough that it could impact you and change everything on a dime because the company wasn't doing well. I was going through this existential crisis and a lot of self-reflection. During this time, I went through a fellowship with the Swedish Institute and that program opened my eyes. It was focused on corporate social responsibility and sustainability in business. Terms that I had not really thought about in my aviation bubble and I was fascinated. I was fascinated with the subject. I was fascinated with my colleagues on the program and curious about all the fantastic things that were happening in the world around me that I had kind of missed.

I started to take an interest [20:00] and when the time came, that means Kingfisher had shut down, I was supposed to do a project as part of this fellowship within my company,

but there was no organization to implement the project in. I decided I was going to do something on my own with the help of my colleagues in the program. We thought of actually launching a mentorship program for women to achieve their career potential. We were working on it, but in December 2012, there was this horrific incident of a young woman, Jyoti Singh, who we call in India, Nirbhaya. She was gang-raped on a bus in Delhi and subsequently, she lost her life because it was a brutal gang rape where she was beaten. She was raped multiple times on the moving bus and they inserted metal rods into her body, pulling out all her innards. This incident was so shocking that it sparked the conversation on sexual and gender-based violence in the country. Of course, it made global news, and like everyone else, I was outraged. I participated in candlelight vigils, protests, demonstrations. I expressed my outrage on all social media platforms, but I felt it wasn't enough. Hearing the stories that others felt confident enough to share, also triggered my own memories of several other incidents that had happened. I was groped on a train as a 13-year-old. I witnessed masturbation on public buses. There were a few incidences of sexual harassment at the workplace and all this everyday sexism that impacts women and women's health, but we don't even realize it. When I started to remember these stories and heard all my friends' stories, I felt we had [22:00] to do something more. We had to do something concrete. I guess I was at this moment in my life where I was ready. Ready for this next challenge. Coming back to my personal story of my mum and us going through the domestic violence experience, I had reached this financial stability in my life where I felt I could now give back, or as we say in Vital Voices, another fellowship I'm part of, pay it forward. I took the plunge and within 10 days of the gang rape, along with my friends, I launched a platform called Safecity where we crowd-map sexual violence. At the time we were only mapping in public spaces, but we now also map domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence.

Maggie Lemere:

Wow. What a journey? I want to go through that story you just told in a little more detail, because I think it's really important and interesting in terms of your major pivot point in your life and starting this journey, this next chapter of your journey. You decided to go study at the Swedish Institute and you were looking at, I think you said, sustainability or corporate social responsibility. How did you decide to do that? Especially ... Well, I know you said the airline was going through some financial difficulty, but tell me more about that decision, first of all. Because that was maybe the first part of the series of things that really changed what you were doing, what you have been doing.

Elsa D'Silva:

It's true. It's a snowball effect in a way. I didn't go to study anywhere. Actually, that's not true. The Swedish Institute, which is the cultural arm of the government of Sweden has

various fellowships. One of which is the Swedish Institute Management Program for India [24:00] and where during that time they would take 20 Indian professionals for this program. At the time that I did it, there were three modules. Two in Sweden and one in India. You could do it as you were working. You didn't have to quit your job or leave for an extended period of time. These were like a short executive education course. How did I get into this? I think my whole journey with Safecity is serendipity, or there's a larger, stronger force that's been guiding my work. It's a very spiritual journey in a way. When I look back, I realize that out of the blue in January 2012, I got this fax. Can you believe a fax? I haven't seen a fax machine in ages, but I received a fax inviting me to apply for this program, and there were just three days left. We had to write essays, get references, et cetera. When I looked at it, I was intrigued with this program because of course, I had never heard of sustainability or corporate social responsibility. I said, "Okay. Fine. Maybe I should apply." Around April, I was invited for the interviews for a start date of June for this program. Now, by April, Kingfisher was at the height of its crisis and by September, which was the first module in Sweden, we shut down. I feel this came at the right time for me. I didn't know it then, but I applied for this program in advance for when my airline would [26:00] go through this crisis. Whilst all my colleagues were going through a depression, I had something to look forward to. I was excited, motivated, and I was all charged up and they couldn't understand why I was so positive. It was exciting to do something really new at a moment of crisis. Yeah. Immediately after we shut down, I was vice president, network planning. I was still working on recovery plans with Kingfisher and even if it had recovered because we were talking to some Middle East airlines for a module, it would have been a much smaller airline, and I personally didn't see myself continuing because I like challenges. I wanted to be always in a challenging environment if I think about it. Yeah. This particular fellowship came at exactly the right time as I needed it and it gave me the network and the courage to pursue Safecity.

Maggie Lemere:

Thank you for clarifying that. You said when you were in the fellowship, you were deciding what you would create and that's when the horrible, pretty famous incident happened with the young woman on the bus, and how shocking it was. I'm wondering if you can tell me more about your response. I actually lived in India for maybe seven months in Tamil Nadu though. So, a very different part of the country. I remember being aware that if a man became too close to me, that it was never by accident if that makes sense. The gender [28:00] is very divided, I was always really conscious of how a man was in relationship to me. In my study abroad program, a girl was raped the semester before I went to India. So we were never allowed to travel alone. I remember being really annoyed by that, but also it was super important because of what had happened and I was in a more rural area actually. I'm wondering if you can give a little bit of

background about these issues and obviously the incident was very shocking, but where your understanding was about the safety of women. How you reacted to this incident. Sometimes things are shocking, but not surprising. I'm just curious if you could elaborate on that and your experience with safety yourself. You also mentioned the experience, on a train growing up, if you could just tell us more.

Elsa D'Silva:

I'm just trying to think, where to begin.

Maggie Lemere:

It's a big question.

Elsa D'Silva:

So, the safety of women, right? When I think back, I had all these experiences growing up, as I mentioned, of course, domestic violence at home when I've seen how ugly it can get and the impact on the family. I also experienced it in public spaces, whereas a 13-year-old, we had gone to visit my grandparents' home. My grandfather had just passed away and we were returning from his one month mass, the anniversary mass. It was a traumatic time because a loved one had just passed away and we were returning home. I remember, we were on this [30:00] train, my mom, my brother and sister and myself, and they were much younger of course. Just before we could reach our destination, the train actually turned from a fully ladies compartment into a general compartment, which means men could enter, there was this period in time where they expected fewer women to travel in the compartment. So to optimize, they would allow men to join in; the station before our destination, this happened. Suddenly an empty compartment became completely crowded and everybody was squished together. Suddenly I felt my skirt being lifted and somebody slipping his hand into my undergarments and touching me inappropriately. I wanted to scream, but it was so crowded. I felt my voice would be drowned out. I was concentrating on trying to get out of that crowded compartment and I just wanted to move those hands away, but I couldn't, my arms were up into my body because of the crush of people in that little tiny space. I managed to get out of it. I was so traumatized that I, forever after that, hated traveling by train in Mumbai, I have no problem traveling by train anywhere else in the world. It was until I started my work with Safe City, when we were doing some storytelling sessions, that I realized that my intense dislike for traveling by train, which is the most convenient way of traveling in Mumbai actually corresponded to this experience that I had on this train as a 13-year-old. Similarly, I hated traveling by bus, which is also another cheaper way of traveling in Mumbai because I experienced masturbation. You know, these men [32:00] would sit next to you and under their bag,

they would unzip themselves and expose themselves and you would feel uncomfortable. For some reason, you never felt like you had the agency to speak up, shout out, break your silence, simply because there was shame involved and often you're made to feel like it's your fault, even though people never really told you that it was your fault. Somehow you're made to believe that, I don't know why. That's also one of the reasons we spend a lot of time educating women and girls, and then fast track to my aviation career, where for six years I was a safety instructor, teaching pilots and cabin crew safety procedures.

One of the things that we constantly do and aviation is one of the safest industries, transportation industries. Yes, it makes big news when a plane crashes. But if you really go to see the number of deaths in aviation versus the number of deaths on the road, in road accidents, it's a very vast difference. And the reason is training. So you're constantly educating people to be situationally aware so that they can make the best choices in the shortest period of time and the quickest instinctive reflexive responses. When it comes to our daily routines and safety, we tend to neglect that. That's why I feel the work that I do incorporates that, by collecting these stories, we are bringing intelligence that is location-based or category-based, time of day and day of the week based, to you so that you can make the best choices possible. You may decide for yourself how you want to go to a place, how you want to get there, which route to take, which kind of transportation, do you want to be prepared with the pepper spray? Do you want to be prepared with your SOS app? [34:00] Do you want to know what the laws are because groping might be an issue and you might want to challenge that person in front of you. You may want to have your scenarios playing out in your head, which is not unlike what we would do in aviation before takeoff, before landing, or when we are doing our emergency drill prep.

Maggie Lemere:

You definitely answered the first part. It's interesting, I was asking you specifically about India, of course, but as you alluded to it's also a challenge that women face all over the world and certainly in the US too, with some of these experiences, like men masturbating while you're sitting there. I relate to everything you're sharing. Because I've had that happen way too many times. It's horrible because you feel frozen, there's something kind of inherently scary sometimes about men for us. So just to share that, I totally empathize and relate to those stories and I appreciate you sharing them and painting the deeper picture. Then the second part of that was to understand when that extremely horrible story of the young woman in India on the bus and her and her friend or boyfriend, I'm not sure, when that became so well-known and how unbelievably brutalized she was. I was just curious if you could tell me more about how that affected you and inspired your journey into creating The Red Dot Foundation. If you can take me into more specifically when you first heard that and you started doing activism [36:00] what did you think? Was it, clearly it was shocking but was it surprising? Had you done

activism before? Did you speak up about these issues before? What were those days like, in those moments like for you?

Elsa D'Silva:

To be honest, I was never a gender activist. I never, I don't remember or recall taking up women's issues. Of course, I was a feminist at heart and always, made sure that my teams were well-represented. In fact, my HR would always tell me that no other heads of departments insist on diversity in the recruitment process, in the sense. I would insist that I needed to see women's CVs before I made a choice. That's how I ended up with 33% of women in my department without having a number already in my mind, it just felt that it had to be there. I needed to see more women, I didn't want an all-male team. Having said that, this incident with Nirbhaya, with Jyoti Singh was extremely shocking, right? I still felt that I wanted to continue with that project that I mentioned earlier, which was mentoring women to achieve their career potential because that was something that I knew. However, as the days passed, I realized that every single person I knew, I mean, women, they would share their stories. I realized that we are missing something because; A - none of us had even spoken to each other about it. We didn't feel comfortable talking about it. Most of us had never made any official complaints. Then this particular incident at my yoga class [38:00] really triggered me to take that step. I used to go for this early morning yoga class in the next apartment complex, this woman who had a large terrace, used to conduct the class in her home, and on the terrace, I would sit at the back of the room. That morning, I remember this man, he interrupted the class to share this incident where his son rushed out at four in the morning to go and rescue a friend of his, a young girl, who had gone to a pub after attending a wedding reception. She and her friends were hassled in the pub by a group of young men. Then another group of young men interrupted that violence, but they got into a scrap. Then the first lot, the harassers, were thrown out of the pub. When these girls left the pub, they were waiting out there and they started beating them up and tearing off their clothes. When this man's son, the guy at the yoga class, his son received a phone call and he went to help his friend. Now, as he was recounting that incident, I was thinking about how shocking it was because the whole country was upset about Jyoti Singh and here in Mumbai because we always associated the Jyoti Singh issue to be a Delhi problem.

Mumbai is not like Delhi. Mumbai is far safer than Delhi. Mumbai is more progressive than Delhi. When this man was telling us about this story about his son's friend, I was thinking, this is shocking. This is my own backyard. Then what was even more shocking was the conversation that followed, the yoga class of course was interrupted. [40:00] Then the teacher said, "Oh, what, why, what was she doing so late out there?" And then somebody else said, "Oh, you know, yes, she went for a wedding. So she must have been wearing, you know, skimpy clothing and then went off to the pub." So in a way,

asking for it, and then they went on and on, accusing and finding excuses for this girl. I thought this is rubbish. This is exactly why we should have safe spaces. And then suddenly this woman turned to my mom. My mum also would accompany me to this class. My mum used to sit closer to the teacher and said, "well, you know, [inaudible 00:40:43], doesn't she go out late at night? And my mum says, "yeah, she goes out, she enjoys herself and she travels the world on her own." That's when it struck me that they, I don't know what they think about women, single women, women who are out late at night, who travel by themselves, who like to have a good time and society like ours, the patriarchal ones do not appreciate it. They make it difficult for these women to function or even have a good time. I said, this has to change, and made me so angry, I walked out of that yoga class, called up this friend of mine in Delhi, and said, "You know what? I think we need to put the other project on hold and we need to launch this crowd-map."

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah. That's so interesting. How the two moments came together for you to make you realize that you wanted to really focus on this issue. It's interesting how you brought up, being a single woman as well and how [42:00] there are still so many, assumptions of what you deserve or don't deserve or what you're asking for. Even in these more, quote-unquote, "progressive places", how patriarchy is still so entrenched, that all resonates. So how did you get the idea to do crowd mapping specifically though coming from the mentorship?

Elsa D'Silva:

I think I mentioned to you that the Swedish Institute program had three modules, right? So the first module was at the start of September. The second module was in October, by which time, by which time Kingfisher had shut down. So that's when I decided to expand my project to be open to all, mentoring women to achieve that potential. And a third [module], which was early December in Sweden. They gave us time to work on our projects. At that meeting somebody from the organizing team mentioned HarassMap in Egypt and said, I don't know why they linked it to our project because it had nothing to do with it, but they alerted us to HarassMap in Egypt. And said, "do you want to have a look at this?" We thought it was cool, we thought, Oh, okay. Maybe we should do that as our second project, once we had launched the mentoring portal, however, on returning from Sweden, we had this incident that happened to Jyoti Singh. Since the seed had already been planted in my mind, that there's something like this, which at that time I was told about it. I didn't think it was immediate [44:00] to implement. Now. It felt immediate, urgent, and relevant.

Maggie Lemere:

Got it. Tell me a little bit more about you said you had never really been a gender activist per se. I mean, maybe you were developing into that with your mentorship program and just naturally, organically by looking, as you said, to include women's resumes and all these things, which is really cool. When you decided to start posting on social media, going to the vigils. What was that like? What did that feel like? What did it feel like to be with other women? What was that moment like in India? It seems like it was kind of a watershed moment for the country.

Elsa D'Silva:

It was a watershed moment because it sparked the conversation about sexual and gender-based violence, which is not often spoken about, it's a highly taboo topic. For some reason, women and girls always seem to be at the receiving end of the violence, but also, socially conditioned to not speak up about it. I, all my life, have always had this strong sense of justice. I didn't think of it necessarily as gender justice, but I always felt what people deserve they should get and what is right, is right. I would stand up for the vulnerable and I would pick up the case of somebody who needed support, et cetera. I mentioned, when I was in corporate, I would make sure that my teams were representative in terms of religion, caste, class, gender. I never really felt I needed only one kind of group.

I guess in some ways, I must credit my [46:00] parents for that because they were always open to everyone. We never were restricted in who we met or who were our friends and, and so on and so forth. Now, when it came to launching SafeCity, of course, I didn't know, how do you, how to go about, taking up a social issue. All I was thinking about was we have to get something done. We quickly put together a team, found a technical person to help us with the Crowdmap. It was open-source software. So it was easy to put together. Literally within 10 days of this incident, we had it up and running, but then came the hard part. How do you get the word out? How do you get the stories out? So I started contacting local groups. I started checking the papers for events, for protest marches. I participated in a lot of those. I started talking to people. I started going to all random events, from technical events to cultural events, to gender events. In a way, it helped me understand the issue better. It helped me grow my network, but it also got me reconnected to my city. Remember, I came from corporate and I was in aviation. So my portfolio was such that I was constantly traveling. I was not really grounded even in my own city. I had to understand all those nuances to get my work up and running. I didn't graduate in women's studies. I didn't even have it as a subject, but I was willing to learn and I was willing to unlearn and relearn.

So I happened to meet this woman [48:00] Dipti Doshi, who was trying to set up her own nonprofit. She was trying to organize people based on the methodology of Marshall Ganz from Harvard Kennedy School to get people to think deeply about a particular issue. She initially thought that she would mobilize people and organize them around

higher education. I told her, listen, I don't think that necessarily is an issue. I think violence is a bigger issue. She didn't want to work on gender-based violence. So we said public violence is what we would work on, if she would pick that, I would give her my time. That's when I started helping her organization. One of the projects that I did was in a suburb different from mine, a very upscale suburb, where I partnered with this woman, Marie Paul, who was a community leader in her own community. We, over a six month period, started to understand what are the different kinds of violence that were occurring. We realized chain snatching, which is petty robbery aimed, not only at women, but also men, but mostly women. We collected 20 such accounts in a six month period, we presented it to the community, had a local information fair in the parks, invited them to look at the data, and think about what they want to do about it. Several of them said that they wanted to have a better communication system across the various streets that we had collected the information on. Some of them wanted a signature campaign, which they then presented to the police. Some others decided to have a whistle campaign where they train the Watchmen.

So in Mumbai, we live in apartments and each apartment has, like a Watchman [50:00] who opens the Gates, to let you in, and the cars in, but they're not really trained security guards in most cases. In fact, it is the first job somebody who comes from a rural area to the urban area for the first time picks up. He doesn't really know either how to respond to a crime that's taking place in front of him. So what they did was they gave each of them a whistle and instituted a protocol on the hour from 6:00 PM onwards, they would blow the whistle from the top of the lane to the end of the lane. The first Watchman would blow the whistle, the second third, and like a relay, but in case of an emergency, they would continuously blast the whistle and everybody would pick up on that. Continuously blast, creating a din, and get all the residents out. The police actually endorsed that protocol. That gave these residents a lot of confidence because they just thought they were doing something to help themselves. When they saw the police reacting in a way where they wanted to work with the community and improve safety, they got a lot of confidence. The police accepted the data points. They changed the beat patrol timings, the police chief called the municipal chief and said, "Trim the (trees blocking the) street lights." You know, the trees that were blocking the street lights, then the corporate or the elected representative for their community called them up and said, "why didn't anyone come to me? I have budgets for women's safety. And I can give you CCTV cameras." And now that they knew where these incidents were occurring, there was a clear trend. They could dictate to him where they wanted the CCTV cameras to be placed. You wouldn't believe the crime rate actually went down [52:00] and it just brought the community together but also created a trust relationship between them and the police and it transformed them. When I observed all this that happened in this one project, I then took that same model to Delhi and other places in various communities, low-income communities, rural communities, et cetera. It has been transformational, we

work with the communities to document the stories. Then also to help them think through, what are the trends and patterns emerging and what is it that they as a community want to do to solve the problem.

Maggie Lemere:

Really interesting and really fascinating to hear about that pilot and how it all developed into being what it is today. I'm curious, you said it sort of helps the community form a closer relationship with the police. You've probably heard that there's a lot of challenges in policing right now in the United States, but I don't really know much about how communities across India- This is a very general question, of course... what that relationship has been like. I'd be curious to hear more about that and a little bit more about the process of how Safe City has created that trust.

Elsa D'Silva:

So the police are one stakeholder that you need to build trust with, but in such a scenario, there are so many other stakeholders like civic officials, elected representatives, your own community leaders, your religious leaders. If you have the data, you can then look at the data and figure out who amongst these, do you want to bring to the table for the discussion. Now, yes, police, like in many parts of the world and India too, we look at them with suspicion, and there's very low trust, right? In this particular case, and in many cases [54:00] I've seen, when you go and visit them with data, they cannot dispute the data. Even if this data is anonymous and crowdsourced and not verified, they still cannot dispute it simply because they cannot tell you it's not happening. Unfortunately, when an individual shares her story about being sexually harassed, it's very easy to then turn the lens back on to that person and say, "Oh, you know, you were in the wrong place at the wrong time" or "no, you were wearing something or you deserved it to happen to you." When you can show them that this is a trend and it's happening, not to one woman, but to five people on the same day, at the same location, how are they going to dispute it? That is the beauty of this crowdsourced data. Also, I have noticed that the police really want to do something about it. It's just that they also don't know how to approach the problem. They don't know where to begin, especially if they don't have the data, they don't know what to do. How will they make the decisions or effective decisions? They are just using their understanding of the problem to fix it. Again, it's a very gendered approach because it may not be their lived experience. Second, without enough information, they really don't have a creative way to solve it. Whereas, if you involve the community and if you have the data, this aggregated gender data, you could be creative about it. We have done that. We have used art on the walls. We call them talking walls, where women express their feelings on these walls and talk about staring and commenting on things, that I'm sure if you've been to India, you would have experienced, but how many people can you put in jail for

staring and commenting, or how many people can you fine? It'll be [56:00] an exhausting task. It's better to invest in preventive strategies, like putting the community on notice and encouraging them to be better behaved and helping them understand that these are violations, of personal space and privacy, and that this is not acceptable.

So this is just one of the ways with another partner in Kibera, which is one of the largest informal settlements in Kenya. She's a Vital Voices Fellow like me. She partnered with me and her data showed a spot where girls were getting harassed on the way to school. And she thought about who do I call? And she noticed there was a mosque in the vicinity. She called the priest of that mosque, the Imam, to look at the data. He was shocked. He started preaching to the boys and the men in his sermons. And that had an immediate impact because imagine your religious leader, a person in authority, is telling you that what you're doing is not okay. So now, do you want to conform or do you want to violate his instructions? So that's what I mean by the data making something that is currently invisible, visible. Also creating situational awareness, which you can use to your advantage in many different ways to prevent the crime from happening.

Maggie Lemere:

It's incredible. And also the fact that the data is so transparent because reflecting on the situation here, in the US, there's so many... We don't have transparency, I would say, often into how many cases are always happening and what's happening with things rape kits afterward. There's had to be a lot of investigations. So I think making that data transparent and accessible to everyone is a really powerful concept. And I'm also interested in your work because it's sort of both the [58:00] data side, but also the narrative side, what you were just saying about how you can't arrest people for staring. Can you talk a little bit more about these really incredible projects around storytelling?

Elsa D'Silva:

Storytelling is extremely critical and important because it's through these storytelling sessions that other women realize that their experiences are a violation. Many of them intuitively know it, but they may not be aware that under Indian law, it could be a crime. Yes, it may not carry a jail sentence, but there would be a fine, or maybe some kind of punishment. But they don't know it. And of course, they don't know that they have the right to speak up.

So these stories are extremely important to share because other women now know they are not alone. They don't then necessarily have to look at themselves as a victim because there's a... You try to... The way we do it is you put the spotlight on the space. What is it about that space that is causing this violence to happen? Because we are not collecting information about the victim or the perpetrator. We are collecting about what happened to you, where did it happen, the date and time?

And it's shifting that focus to think about what is making it the comfort zone of the perpetrator to operate in? And can we change that? And to me, if we are able to change that, that's a huge win because it's easier to change it. So it could be a design issue. It could be a lighting issue. It could be an educational issue. And of course, then training them to have the confidence to speak up in the right manner, also to get bystanders engaged and involved, or if they are bystanders, to intervene and interrupt, and then build faith in the system. Make the systems work. You know, we have legislation [01:00:00] for all of these crimes. We need that legislation to be effective. We need the justice system to be effective. We need the police to do their job. We need the helplines to work. But it won't work if we don't engage with it. I know it's frustrating, but we still have to start somewhere.

Maggie Lemere:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. It's amazing how sometimes there are laws against things, but the predominant culture is not enforcing or making those experiences visible. So you're working on these various levels of cultural and social change and enforcement and legal change. So just to go back a little bit, and finding this idea and doing the pilot program, at what point did you realize that this was going to be your life moving forward? And how did you feel about that?

Elsa D'Silva:

I think, first of all, I must compliment you, Maggie, that you really pick on the right things to ask.

Maggie Lemere:

Thank you.

Elsa D'Silva:

So Kingfisher shut down, and like I said, I was looking for my purpose, and I launched SafeCity as an immediate response to the gang rape of Jyoti Singh. But after listening to all these stories and push backs from the community around me. But I did not think at that point in time that it was going to be my lifelong mission. I honestly thought it would be, put a piece of tech out there and it would function on its own, people would share their stories and that's it. But very quickly I realized that it's not going to happen on its own. You have to get women to think about this issue more deeply and be confident enough to share that story, even if it's anonymous. And for one whole year, so all of 2013, [01:02:01] I was wavering. I was like, I don't think this is going to occupy my entire time. How am I going to be busy? Because I was a busy corporate executive one year

earlier, and I was used to working long hours and I was used to being busy all the time. And I couldn't imagine that this job with SafeCity would keep me busy, and I was afraid of that. But I think I was even more afraid of failing because the issue itself was so big. And I thought I was not the right person to do it. I didn't have the skills to do it. And the issue was bigger than what I could contribute to. And so I was afraid and uncomfortable and I fought it. In fact, I even tried to start two other ventures. One was on senior citizen care and the other was on youth empowerment. And both of those never took off. And despite me being half committed to SafeCity in that year, things started picking up. We would get a call from the BBC, Al-Jazeera for an interview. Then I would get calls from volunteers in Delhi saying, "Tell us what we should do." And I would guide these people, and they would collect 500 reports and they would do amazing things to make their college campuses safer. And at the same time, I was doing this experiment in Bandra, in Bombay. And I could see the change happening. It was slow at first, but I could see how confident everybody around me was becoming, and then how the police reacted. And finally in November 2013, my Swedish mentor, they had come for the following year's fellowship for the India part of the lab. He sat me down, and he said, "Look, if you don't [01:04:00] focus and you don't commit to this a hundred percent, you're going to miss the bus." And that was a rude awakening because it got me thinking. And like I said earlier, in my corporate journey, I had to have nudges everywhere to get me going on the next part of my journey. And this was a nudge again from a mentor who could see that there was potential in this idea and I was not putting my hundred percent into it. And then after that conversation with him, I committed verbally that I would do it a hundred percent, and then things just started happening at a pace that feels like I was on a roller coaster.

Maggie Lemere:

Wow. Well, a couple of things I want to pick up on there. You've kind of mentioned it a few times, is sort of maybe because of the way that we're raised as women and girls, that you didn't necessarily expect your promotions or expect that you were the right person to lead this movement, this organization. Can you talk more about kind of, that mindset, and also just as importantly, how you started to kind of overcome it? Because I think that's a lot... I relate to that in, a lot of women and girls do, sort of what I would call imposter syndrome, potentially.

Elsa D'Silva:

When I look back, yes, I was nudged into my promotions, but I never shy away from a challenge. So when presented with a challenge, I grab with both hands the opportunity and I give it my hundred percent. And my strength is in execution, execution of the vision of whatever is given to me. Right? But with SafeCity, it was my vision. What was my vision for it? Because it was mine. [01:06:00] There's nobody else to ask. Right? In

corporate, it was always somebody else's vision that I was executing and implementing, but this was slightly different because it had to be my vision. My co-founders had checked out. So it was just me. And therefore I have to first be comfortable with dedicating my time and effort to this issue, which of course I was because of my own personal experiences. But I needed that nudge to give me the confidence to say, "Hey, listen, you are onto something and you can give it your best shot."

And then I sat myself down and I thought, okay, what's the worst that could happen? That I'm going to fail. Right? So what? I will fail, but at least I would have said I tried my best and I would have learned from it. And this is the best moment because remember a couple of years ago, you were bored in corporate. You felt you were at your glass ceiling and you wanted a sabbatical, you wanted a break, you wanted to find your purpose. Maybe this is your opportunity. So I made a list. I'm really good at making lists. So I made a positive list and a negative list. What are the things that can go wrong? And I said I'll give myself one year and let me give it my hundred percent.

And so in 2014 at the start, we got through an incubator in Philadelphia, which was floated by the mayor. And he had sent a call out for organizations who were working in public safety to put in an application. And we were selected. There were 10 organizations. We were the only international ones. I spent three months in Philadelphia going through this incubator that helped me think about how do you set up an organization? [01:08:00] Who are your clients? Are the clients the ones paying for it, so then you would have two different customers? How would you raise money? How would you measure your impact? Et cetera. Came back from there and registered the organization as Red Dot Foundation, and then started to implement the plans.

And I was so busy that I didn't realize that one year had gone past and I said, okay, I'm enjoying this. It's challenging. It's exciting. There's a lot of opportunities here. Of course, there were a lot of struggles. And as a new entrepreneur, social entrepreneur like that, you are constantly reinventing. Plans change. You have to pivot. And I started to look out, okay, who can I get on my team? Built my team slowly. And I always kept sight on the goal. If I'm not enjoying the work, maybe I need to relook at it. If I feel like I'm not adding value to the issue, then maybe I need to step back and maybe help somebody else do it. And every time it kept coming back to say, no, you're on the right path, and keep going, keep pushing the boundaries, keep experimenting, and keep building on the work that you've already done.

It's been a fantastic eight years, I must say. There has been a lot of struggle, but as I mentioned earlier, it's been a very spiritual journey. I've always had the right amount of support from people around me and from the fellowships. And from the fellowships that I've attended, I call myself the queen of fellowships. But all of them have been amazing because they've given me different skills. Some of them have been women's networks [01:10:00] like Vital Voices, then Aspen New Voices gave me skills in communication, how to write an op-ed, how to speak in public, how to structure your message for

impact. The Rotary Peace Fellowship took me back to school where I learned about conflict resolution... Learned the frameworks of peace and conflict resolution and so on and so forth. So yeah, so it's been an incredible journey and I'm really, really grateful that I was in a way, chosen to do it.

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah. I like how you frame that, that you were chosen. I'm curious about what pushback you have received or what that might look like in your context, and what some of those challenges are. And you used the word "spiritual" to describe the journey, so I was wondering if you could talk more about that and sort of what that dimension to this work is to you, to this life commitment at this moment?

Elsa D'Silva:

I don't like to think about push backs, but things that have not gone well have been, initially, because I came from outside of the women's movement. The traditional non-profits were a little reluctant to collaborate because they didn't think I knew what I was doing. And maybe there was some truth to that. It was a journey, honestly. But I had corporate experience and I knew that what I was doing was very much in line with what I was doing in corporate, because as vice-president of network planning, I was using historical data to understand patterns and trends to make current and future business decisions, which is not very different from using historical experiences of [01:12:00] women and girls to understand patterns and trends of what they were experiencing to design preventive measures in their communities. Right?

So, at least that part I got right. And then it was also about how do you get funding? I didn't know the social sector. I didn't know anyone in the social sector. So I had to recreate my networks from scratch and I had to build trust with donors, funders, help them understand what we were doing. So communicating the way we were operating. It had never been done before in India. I don't think other than HarassMap Egypt, anyone else is doing what we are doing. So it was very hard for people to understand how crowdsource data, which at that point in time was a very new term, could be useful or could add value. Today, of course, crowdsource data is very, very important and people recognize that it's a unique data set which doesn't otherwise exist and can be used to supplement other data sets for decision-making. But at the time, they didn't know that.

And then the other part that was the legislation. So we were a new nonprofit and we couldn't accept foreign money because we weren't old enough for that. We needed special government permission and that took time. So it was a systemic barrier, in a way. And there were some corporates who couldn't give us money because they had to have FCRA... They had an internal procedure of only giving nonprofits that were three-years in existence [01:14:00] their CSR funds. So by the time we were three

years, we got past that hurdle. And then after some time, we got the government permission and so on and so forth.

So we worked through those issues. I don't see that we got any pushback in that, other than just working through difficult moments like these. When it came to the police or any other civic authority, I feel that they've all been reasonable, have been open, and when it comes to the data, they can't really dispute it. So we've always been surprised with their pleasant relationships with us.

Maggie Lemere:

That's good. I'm glad to hear that. And when you say it's a spiritual journey, what do you mean by that for you?

Elsa D'Silva:

I mean, it's literally magical, because I'm now in the stage where if I dream it, it's happening. So for example, every time I think about, "Okay, I really don't have money in the bank to pay salaries," I will get the exact amount for the salaries. Or if I'm wondering, "Is this a path that I should go down?" I will get a sign that... You know, somebody will meet me and endorse it in a way. Or if I'm struggling with something, I will get through a fellowship that will give me the skills for exactly the thing that I'm struggling about. So right now I'm at a stage where I say, "Okay, bring it on." I will do my best because that's what's required of me, but everything else will fall into place because it's meant to be.

Maggie Lemere:

I love that. [1:16:00] That's really beautiful. I like the "Bring it on" spirit. That's inspiring. A couple of things about where the work is now that I thought were really interesting was that I think you mentioned that you're not only mapping public spaces, but also domestic spaces. And I was wondering if you could talk about that and how those two experiences might be connected. And in Georgetown's research, they found that 22% of women in India have experienced intimate partner violence or domestic violence in the home. And so I was wondering how you see the relationship between what happens in the home and what happens on the street and kind of how Safe City started making those connections?

Elsa D'Silva:

So I had always made that connection, but I chose to work on public spaces because domestic violence is a hard issue to work on. The person who is perpetrating the violence is often a loved one, and it's very hard to walk away. It takes a lot of resources to be in a secure spot. And I didn't feel I had the ability to work on it from day one. But

my idea of working on public spaces was a roundabout way of addressing domestic violence, because if I could make public spaces safer for women and girls, build their confidence to access all the opportunities that a safe space offers, they could then be financially independent, up-skill themselves, and have the options to deal with that violence at home. Think about my mum. If she did not have the financial capability to walk out of that relationship, she would not have been able to provide for us. Right? So that was my way of indirectly addressing domestic violence.

But during COVID 19, I found that everywhere domestic violence was spiking, including in [01:18:00] India. Within two weeks of the lockdown being announced, the National Commission for Women reported a hundred percent increase in emergency calls. So I thought about it, and the first thing to do was okay, add domestic violence as a category on our crowd map. The second was we started Safe Circle, middle of May, where we...So Safe Circle [01:20:00] is a safe listening space and a peer support group, much like Alcoholics Anonymous. It's not a therapy session, but it's more peers of survivors who come together and share experiences and find solidarity and build a community. And I'm so proud of this group because every Friday we've met and we've supported at least 25 women over these past four or five months. And we don't allow anyone who's not a survivor in this group, because we don't believe that anybody should walk in and be an observer. We are not in a fishbowl. And then what we also did was, we realized that domestic violence survivors weren't able to access services during a lockdown scenario. For example, shelter homes were not accepting them. There was no mobility because trains, buses, Ubers, autos, rickshaws, taxis weren't running, and so on and so forth. So we filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India to declare domestic violence prevention services as essential. Unfortunately, when it came up for hearing, they redirected us to the government to work with them to issue the guidelines, and now it's gone into a black loop. But [01:20:00] we simultaneously launched a change.org petition and it's got almost 30,000 signatures in support of it. So that's what we've done for domestic violence. But the other part of our work, which has also evolved and is very interesting, is urban planning and design for safe and inclusive cities. And just recently, we signed an MOU with the National Institute of Urban Affairs who wants us to work with them on safe and inclusive cities, an intelligence dashboard, as well as an accelerator for innovations at the citizen and community level. And I think that is a very exciting part of my work. So I'm looking forward to it and I believe it might be a game-changer.

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah. And it goes to that preventative work that you've been talking about, which is so important in all of this because there's so much through design that your data is showing that can impact our experiences that are so intimate and fundamental to our

everyday lives. I'm also kind of curious about how... I think... So one of the things that our research at Georgetown found is the number of women who have access to cell phones is constantly expanding in India, but there are still some who don't have it. And also it looks like there's still a lot of women who don't have access to, kind of, formal education. So I'm wondering how you deal with maybe the most marginalized, and probably therefore vulnerable, women in society when thinking about this work as well.

Elsa D'Silva:

In my opinion, technology should not be a barrier to reporting. [01:22:00] And yes, we are a tech platform, but we accept the data through many different channels. One is a missed call. So a missed call is something unique in India, maybe in other countries as well. But here it's used... Often people call a number, it gets disconnected and we call them back, get their story. So that takes care of if somebody has a language issue if they are illiterate if they don't have a phone because they can use a landline as well.

Second is we learned from our partner, Jane in Kenya, she had what she called "talking boxes," which she had placed in strategic locations. And people would put their stories in the form of little notes, and then she and her team would collect these notes, read them, and then act upon them. What we helped her do was digitize these notes and helped her look at them as trends, patterns, clusters based on location. And then that gave her the authority to work with several other agencies, the education system, she used community radio to talk about some of these insights with the community, she involved religious leaders, even the city planning officials. So we also have used these talking boxes in many parts of India where women may not have mobile phones. And I think it's a simple tool that can be used. I don't think that we should only rely on technology. Technology should be our aid, not a barrier. And yes, maybe our idea was a little ahead of our time, but as we move along, more women will be mobile, as in access to [01:24:00] mobiles, and they will know how to use these. And COVID-19 is actually accelerating that because now all our work is on digital platforms. So those who were not are now forced to, and in a way, they are becoming comfortable using these platforms. So I think the timing is right. And we are now looking at partnerships on the tech side with community-based organizations, but also with civic administration, with police transport officials, so that they can use the data, but also come up with ways to collect the data in an easy manner, and use that data more importantly for preventive solutions.

Maggie Lemere:

That's so cool. So inspired. Yeah. You're such a true social entrepreneur. I used to work with Ashoka actually before working with Georgetown. And so it was always interesting that there were a lot of people who had technology ideas. But I think social

entrepreneurs are the ones who sort of think about it the way you do and think about it as a tool. It's sort of a greater shift in society. So just really neat to hear.

Another question I have kind of about where your work is today is, you mentioned **Kibera** in Kenya and obviously these challenges. There might be specific nuances in India, but they're so global, you know. So many other things you're talking about, I've experienced, my friend's experienced in the United States. And so I know that you've been expanding or scaling and working with different communities. And I'm curious you know, what that journey has been like and what insights you've gained about these issues or about your work, and how you see this growing into the future.

Elsa D'Silva:

So [01:26:00] you're right. Sexual violence is a global pandemic. And now during this actual pandemic, they're calling it a shadow pandemic, as though it's of lesser importance. But I've spoken at hundreds of events all over the world and women come to me and share their stories as well. Many of them have said you've given a vocabulary to our experience. Because by breaking it down in the various forms of it, verbal, non-verbal, and then further. Staring, luring, ogling, commenting, catcalling, stalking, touching, groping. It's in a way helping them process what has happened, by labeling it. And now they know, okay, I'm not the only one who it's happening to because they can go to the map and see, and they can read those stories and comment, and, you know, in solidarity. But they can also use this data because it's in the open-source format to start a dialogue in their communities, in their families, at their schools, at their colleges, and engage with their institution's service providers, whether it is campus administration, civic administration, transportation, or even your residential association. Because why should it be your problem alone? It should never be your problem. It's a societal problem, that's causing it to happen. And we need to change that. And we found that even men and boys when you engage them and they see the data and they engage with the stories, they're compelled to do something about it. They can't sit still and ignore it. how can you not take action? Right? And the action doesn't have to be big. You don't have to quit your job. Like I did and start a nonprofit. It's small things, calling out that sexist joke, [01:28:00] mentoring that friend, being an active bystander, interrupting the violence, being an empathetic friend, educating yourself on the legislation or the helplines, and passing that information to somebody who might need it, or just listening to somebody's stories like we do at Safe Circle. There are so many things that one can do. And yet, we don't do it. We pretend like it doesn't happen, or it's not happening. Every day it's happening. If we just observe, we'll notice it. So I have learned so much from my work and then talking to people like just today, this must be my fourth conversation. And I kind of try and do as much as I can because I know I'm reaching different audiences with it. Collecting these stories has been the hardest job I've ever done. I tell people that as vice-president of network planning, optimizing 500

daily flights seems now like a piece of cake. This has been really the hardest job I've ever done, getting women and girls to confront their demons, part with their stories, and feel confident in doing so. We never force anyone to share their story. But, we help them and we help them think through, okay, now that you've shared your story, how can such a dataset also help you? And then when I hear stories of how confident people have become. How it has changed their life because now they feel strong enough to negotiate with their parents for higher education. They feel confident enough to take a bus later at night and now access that college, which is further from their home, or take up a job in a different city, or explore other options available to them. I feel like it's a job well done. [01:30:00]

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I love hearing how you think about storytelling and how that builds confidence. And I imagine it would have been potentially uncomfortable to share your own story of when you were a girl at first and getting into this role. How do you feel like sharing your story in this journey has changed you or affected you?

Elsa D'Silva:

It's healed me. Honestly, when I first told my own story about being groped on the train at 13 years old, it was extremely difficult. But now that I've shared that and many other stories, including my own domestic violence experience, I feel comfortable saying it and I feel that in doing so, I help other people share their own story as well. It's a responsibility I have and I cannot ignore it. I've been called to do this work, and I feel if I am not comfortable sharing my story, how can I expect anyone else to share this story? Or at least document it. Today is Gandhi's birthday. Mahatma Gandhi's Birthday. And I quote his quote often, "be the change you wish to see."

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah. And I think it's really powerful that you share that, doing that isn't easy because sometimes we sort of see these social change leaders and they can feel very un-relatable. Like how do they get to be so confident and so bold, in the face of patriarchy or whatever potential challenges you might be facing. But [01:32:00] as the story you've shared with us today shows it's really a journey that you embrace and you take all these steps and then you end up somewhere. So I know we don't have much more time. I don't want to be too greedy.

Elsa D'Silva:

I want to add, but after starting SafeCity Somewhere before I committed 100% to it, I even did a counseling course. In fact, I trained as a counselor in two different methods

of counseling and that also was therapeutic and healing. And now I insist that all my leadership team train as counselors because if we don't heal ourselves and confront our own demons, we won't be able to help others. Our work is too emotional. We need to make sure that we are emotionally, mentally, and physically strong enough to do it.

Maggie Lemere:

And so glad you brought that up because there's so much trauma involved in working on these issues and it forces us to explore the trauma in our own lives, but also you're holding the trauma and the potential for healing of other people. And it sounds like you've made a really deep and committed effort to work on that. Not only for yourself, but for your team, but I'm sure there are still days where that's really hard, where you hear stories that are just heartbreaking and infuriating. How do you sustain yourself? Kind of being exposed to all of this injustice, I guess, for lack of a better way to put it,

Elsa D'Silva:

It's hard, but having trained as a counselor, I'm very aware of my own energy levels, my mental health status. And [01:34:00] when I feel overwhelmed, I take a break and taking a break, maybe, doing something completely different, spending time with my family, going for a walk in the park. It could be listening to music, reading a book, watching movies. I binge watch when I watch. It also means regular exercise and mindfulness and meditation. So all of these things are extremely important because I recognize that I have to be fit in every way possible to do this very important task. But I also know that I am not going to be able to solve the whole thing by myself so I can only do my best. And it is in a limited way. But through collaborations, I can expand that little into a little more, but I have to be humble enough to recognize that I'm not going to solve the problem. So there's no point getting frustrated and overwhelmed as well because this is a long journey. It's going to be a long journey, a marathon, and you have to sustain yourself for it.

Maggie Lemere:

Absolutely. Yeah. There's something interesting about being an activist or a social entrepreneur where you're so passionate about a problem, but you also realize, as you said that you can't solve it and you're moving it forward and you're moving the solutions forward, and you're moving the transformation of people and communities forward. But even what the goal is, should always be changing to become more and more progressive. So it's like this intense attachment, but you also have to have a level of detachment almost at the same time in order to do it. That makes sense to me.

[crosstalk 01:36:00].[01:36:00]

Elsa D'Silva:

Surround yourself with positive people. People who add value to your life. Do the things you love, love the things you do. I always tell other social entrepreneurs, take your time, but pick something that you're passionate about because life is never going to be smooth all the time. There will be troughs and there will be highs. When it's high, everything is perfect and rosy, but it's when you're at the lowest moment that's when you need to sustain yourself. And if you are passionate about it, at least half the battle is won. Because you're going to need that passion to take you through that low point and again, get you to the high.

And nobody knows all the failures and nobody knows all the pain points you go through because what you post on social media are only the success stories. All the awards that you win, the accolades, you get the pictures with Hillary Clinton, and so on and so forth. But people don't know the sacrifice, the hardships, the worries that you go through because it's not only ... So as I'm an activist and an advocate, but I'm also an entrepreneur, which means there's a business side to the things that I do. And they may not always work out the way you want. So there's going to be trouble. You have to expect that and therefore, love the things you do and do the things you love.

Maggie Lemere:

That resonates as well, very deeply. If you don't love it, I'm thinking I work on documentary film and I'm sure as entrepreneurs you go through these experiences where you apply for [01:38:00] things and you get so many rejections or you get so many almost yeses. And there are so many moments where you could easily feel rejected or you give up. So you really have to like, try to enjoy, and love what you do enough to have an internal drive that is deeper than anything else.

Elsa D'Silva:

Absolutely. A lot of people don't necessarily understand that ... They think failure is a bad thing, but I feel failure is a good thing. Failure allows you to move on. You've tried it, it didn't work. And now it's time to move on. You may grieve for a bit, but then move on. Don't get stuck in it.

Maggie Lemere:

That's a great piece of advice. And also just embracing a culture like that. Because I think it's also easy to sort of... If you're someone who's been good at school and always achieved things on a certain path, and then you try to do something new. You can't expect perfectionism, even if you've tried to strive for that your whole life or something because it just won't work when you're trying new things. That can be really hard.

Elsa D'Silva:

In the social sector what I've learned is to be patient because it operates on its own time. It's extremely slow unlike corporate or the private sector. Second is... So one is patience, one is humbleness. You have to be humble because you're trying to do something for a bigger cause. And you may only make dents into it, or you chip away over a period of time and you can not see the immediate success of your work because it's so hard to measure. So patience and humbleness and then delegation.

Elsa D'Silva:

And [01:40:00] like you said, failure for every success, I would have got at least 19 other rejections. But, you have to keep trying, you have to move on and perfectionism... I always thought I was a perfectionist. I've had to compromise on my standards, but again, not to an extent where you compromise the quality of your product. But yes, when I say perfectionism, I can't do it all myself. So I have to delegate. And in delegating, I have to be patient, I have to be humble, and I have to be a mentor, guide, and coach.

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah, absolutely. Those are great insights. Something I was just thinking of, that I wanted to come back to before our final questions, was, you mentioned, that your background, coming from a Catholic family, you said that it affects your work today. I just wanted to follow up on that to see if there was more you wanted to add about that background and how it affects this.

Elsa D'Silva:

I recently wrote a letter to myself, my 16-year-old self, and I spoke about how I would go through my years in conflict with my internal value system. And then my religious value system. And I would fight for women's rights. I would fight for the unjust. And yet I would break probably with the tenets of the Catholic church. Because of LGBTQ, abortion. I may not always take that stand. And it takes courage to do that. When you come from a conservative family, just saying it to your own relative sometimes might be shocking to them and very scary for you because you don't know how they're going to react, but [01:42:00] if you have to live by your value system, you have to do it. And I've over the years become very attuned to my value system and it strengthened me in the process.

Maggie Lemere:

I'm just curious. I really don't know, which is, I feel sad about this. But what is the system with reproductive justice or reproductive rights, perhaps, there's no other way of

saying it, for women in India? After they go through ... I guess I'll start generally, does that figure into the mix.

Elsa D'Silva:

It's a mixed bag Because we are not allowed to have a sonography [sonogram?] that will reveal the sex of the girl child because there's a high femicide rate. Yet at the same time, you're not allowed abortion beyond a period of time. So there is abortion, but then it's also not allowed beyond a certain time. And it's not allowed, especially if you have determined the sex of the child, yet there are Indians who go to other countries and have those abortions And if they've determined, the child is a girl. Then you have forced sterilization in many places, et cetera. So it's a really mixed bag. There's also a situation in my own state, where hundreds of villagers, the women working on the sugar cane plantations, were made to undergo hysterectomies. And they were all of childbearing ages. Why? Because those people didn't want them to take extra loo breaks when they were having their periods.

Maggie Lemere:

Wow.

Elsa D'Silva:

And nobody talked about it, not in the mainstream media at all. There was no outrage, nothing. [01:44:03] So for me... I'm constantly reminded when I hear these stories... I'm constantly reminded and I'm so grateful of my birth lottery, where I was born in the family that I was born in. It's not perfect. It's never been a perfect family, but at least, I've had a comfortable life.

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah. I'm not sure even how to ask this question. But is mapping sort of women's experience with these kinds of human rights violations, forced sterilizations or hysterectomies, or, I'm not sure if you think there's a mapping dimension to that aspect of gender equality,

Elsa D'Silva:

But I haven't started to map that yet. Because again, that's very location-specific. And then in my... I don't want to bring harm to that community because it's so specific. So it's like in a way human trafficking, we have to be a little careful about it. But we are rebuilding our tech platform to take care of these kinds of instances where you can report, but it may not reflect on the public map.

Maggie Lemere:

Interesting. There are so many nuances around security and safety. One of the questions that we wanted to ask you, we're asking all of our interviewees, is, what would security or safety look like, for you, for a woman in your community or in India? If you could imagine or describe what that safety should be or how a typical day would be for a woman, as opposed to what it is now, how do you imagine security and safety on a positive?

Elsa D'Silva:

For me, a safe city would be one where I didn't have [01:46:00] to worry about what I was wearing, where I was going, what transport I was going to use, what time I should be back home, what time I'm out there, or if that space is going to be safe or unsafe for me, or even the people around me are trustworthy or not. So for me, all those factors count and I would love to never have to worry about these things and be able to explore my city, my country, and the entire world with abandon and with that childlike curiosity and go to as many places at all times possible and see how people live, how they, experience their cities as well.

Maggie Lemere:

Yeah. I love that description and also that dynamic exchange, that you are also, so moved by, another very broad general question. For you, what would gender equality look like in India? Or in your community, your life?

Elsa D'Silva:

Gender equality would be where we don't have femicide rates like we have now, which are like 896 per 1000... 896 female births to 1000 male births. Where we would have 50% of women in parliament, 50% of women in leadership positions, in politics and business everywhere. Where there's an equal wage. And no disparity in wages where there's no sexual harassment and we don't have gendered laws that are meant to only protect women. So that would be what gender equality looks like. Where women [01:48:01] are truly treated equally to men and can live their constitutional right to equality.

Maggie Lemere:

Do you think there's one policy change about women's rights that would make a huge difference in women's lives in India?

Elsa D'Silva:

I think the policy changes more about intention and will. It's about everybody saying we need 50%, find that 50% make an attempt to create those pipelines and those ecosystems of support and nothing should be less than 50%.

Maggie Lemere:

I love that. So at Georgetown, we interview a lot of women peace-builders, and I'm curious, there're so many different ways we could define you and what you do, as a social entrepreneur, an activist, or a gender rights advocate, et cetera, et cetera. I'm wondering if you identify as a peace-builder or what you think it means to be a peace-builder, or what your relationship to that concept is?

Elsa D'Silva:

I'm a Rotary Peace Fellow, so I'm definitely a peace-builder. And I do believe my work is preventative rather than reactive. And therefore, through the data that we collect, we are actually helping people think of preventive mechanisms. We're also fostering trust and dialogue within communities and between communities and institutions. And helping them have those difficult conversations. So we are definitely peace-building.

Maggie Lemere:

And why is it essential for women to be involved in peace-building?

Elsa D'Silva:

It is definitely essential for everyone to be involved in peace-building because we all want a peaceful society. Why women? A. They are 50% of the population. Two, they are at the [01:50:02] receiving end of so much violence, abuse, and discrimination. And it is in their interest to make sure that it's a peaceful society for all. And women have the capacity to carry everyone along with them. And find ways I think peace-building comes more naturally to women anyway. So it just makes the most sense for them to take lead and charge of the peace-building initiatives.

Maggie Lemere:

It's okay. I think we got through a lot. If there's anything you want to add in the future, we can totally connect again. But also this was incredible and I think we were wrapping up anyway. Thank you so much.

Elsa D'Silva:

I just realized, at seven I have another event...

Maggie Lemere:

I'm going to stop the recording. If you can leave the browser open for just a minute. So it uploads. Okay? All right. Thank you. [01:51:25]