

Mary Lawlor

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SPEAKERS

Mary Lawlor, Tom Pegram

Tom Pegram 00:01

Hi, and welcome to "Imperfect Utopias" based out of the UCL Global Governance Institute. This is a podcast about the challenges facing humanity, and possible global responses. If you're new to the show, and you want to get a list of our favourite books are the resources, listen to past shows, and join our community go to ucl.ac.uk/global-governance. So it's a real pleasure to have Mary Lawlor here with us today. Mary has a long and distinguished career at the coalface of human rights advocacy. It's a particular pleasure for me as Mary has been an inspiration in my own research on human rights and was an early collaborator when I was a fresh young lecturer at Trinity College Dublin. Mary's the founder of Frontline Defenders, the leading human rights organisation in Ireland, which focuses on meeting the immediate security needs of human rights defenders at risk around the world. The ethos of that organisation reflects Mary's own philosophy, which has always placed defenders, those brave individuals placing themselves in harm's way, their rights, the rights of others at the heart of any strategies build a more peaceful and just society. She said that the informal DNA or frontline defenders was to be fast, flexible and furious in amplifying the voice of defenders and without doubt they need support. These are dangerous times to be speaking out of human rights, with hundreds of human rights defenders killed in 2019 regimes of both democratic and authoritarian stripes increasingly brazen in attacking civil liberties and protections. In recognition of her working field, Mary has recently been appointed UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, just as the world has been engulfed in a major pandemic, she's very clear that COVID-19 the situation and the response to it poses an immediate threat to human rights defenders, as well as highlighting health rights crisis and the erosion of hard won human rights protections around the world. In her words, it is in all our interests to protect the right to defend rights. And we can't take that for granted, it seems in this in this time, so we have to find new ways of defending rights in a rapidly changing world order. And we have to do it quickly. We have to learn quickly given a looming climate crisis and related risks. So lots to talk about Mary, perhaps I could just begin by asking you to map out some of the major issues that are on your plate at the moment confronting human rights defenders in July 2020. I imagine some of those challenges are long standing challenges. And others, of course, like COVID-19 novel and very new.

Mary Lawlor 02:57

Yes, well, I have, funnily enough, I've already done my report for the General Assembly, because you need to, they need about four or five months. And I had to do it, like within a month of being in the job. So I had to think very fast about what my priorities were, and are. And but that was helped by the fact that, you know, I've been around human rights defenders for a very long time, and I know their situation. So the kind of things that I am going to concentrate on are, first of all, COVID-19, and the impact on human rights defenders on COVID, because you can't ignore it, and human rights defenders who are the most marginalised and the most vulnerable, and in particular, you know, the ones working in very remote areas, often these are indigenous land and environmental rights defenders. So that would be a focus, along with other vulnerable groups like women, LGBTI, Disability Rights Defenders, and lately, we've just been starting to talk about children as human rights defenders, particularly as climate justice and climate action has become such a such a big looming threat. And, and then, of course, there's the old stalwarts, like long term prisoners and killings of human rights defenders two things that I feel very strongly about. And, and then, of course, link to killings and linked to indigenous land and environment, are business, its business and human rights. So they're all interconnected there and reprisals against defenders who cooperate with the UN. So they're the kinds of things, but I'm also particularly interested in when we're talking about killings and business and human rights and land, environmental and all of that kind of stuff in tracing how a threat develops into a killing, because in 85% of the cases of people who've been killed, it has been preceded by a threat. And in 75% of cases, there's been a physical attack. And this offline and online kind of attack sets human rights defenders up to be attacked, and creates an environment where it's okay for them to be attacked. And then eventually, they're killed. And it certainly frontline defenders they documented over by 304 defenders last year who were murdered, and 13% of them were women and 40% of them were land, environmental and indigenous people. So that's really what I'm doing now, at the moment.

Tom Pegram 05:55

Quite a lot on your plate? I mean, it's almost, it must sometimes seem a little bit overwhelming that you have so many different constituencies, of course, who, who need protection who need assistance? To what extent do you feel that there's, there's some consensus in the human rights movements around what the biggest challenge is? What the principal focus on in terms of strategy to assist these people should actually be?

Mary Lawlor 06:25

Well, I think at the moment, everyone is talking about COVID. I mean, even tomorrow, I'm doing a webinar with her friend special mandates on freedom of expression and freedom of association. But it's not just all you know, us. It's, it's everyone is talking about COVID. And how can you not talk about it, I mean, it has been an unseen, invisible enemy. And not that I'm looking on the bright side of it or anything, but it did show how it can affect even the most powerful people. And that populist or corrupt governments cannot control it, just by stamping down their big bully feet. And so it has created more challenges. So for example, you know, we've been talking to defenders everyday online pretty much since April, since once I was kind of, once I, I basically was told I was getting the job, I started talking to human rights defenders from the five regions. And, of course, they're all now having to work exclusively online. And that can have security implications for them. Because people know where they are. They know that they're not out and about, that they're stuck inside. And so they're more vulnerable than they

would be if then if they were going outside. And women, human rights defenders, particularly in patriarchal countries where often the threats come from within their own family and community are more at risk during this time. And then there's like, there's death threats, Ruth Mumbi in Kenya, for example. She's, she's a woman who works normally in informal settlements for the rights of women. And there was an eviction in Nairobi, of all these women, an illegal eviction. And Ruth decided she would gather some money for food and basic supplies for them. And as a result, she got death threats from the police. And this was despite the government saying it would stop evictions, they were still, these women were still evicted. And then there's laws everywhere Cambodia has brought in laws you can't there's no, you're not allowed any online stuff. And also, you know, there's no obviously no meetings are allowed now obviously, with the pandemic, you need a lot of this stuff. But then there's Russia that has the biggest camera surveillance with facial recognition, more of it brought in. Israel who started cooperation with the NSO agency which has been supplying malware to governments for surveillance for a long time. These are the kinds of things that are happening, and many human rights defenders have shifted from advocacy to humanitarian, you know, to supplying food medicine within their communities, and some of them are still struggling to work online. And then in some countries, of course, it's very expensive to buy data. So for example, in Ethiopia. And of course, internet connections are not good in many countries, including my own. And, for example, yesterday I was talking and we were talking to defenders from- working on extractive industry. And there was, you know, the internet was going in and out, the, there were dogs barking, there were people hammering. So it's very, it can be very difficult. And one of the things that shocked me was that these defenders were saying that they're being staked out by illegal loggers and settlers of a tract of people wanting to, you know, comment on appropriate their land for something, because they know they're, you know, they're unable to protest, they're unable to do anything. So it has that kind of effect. And then in the Amazon, particularly, a lot of the defenders have got COVID. So they're already weakened. So their lands are being taken over as well. And, of course, then there's the economic situation for defenders, they don't know if they're going to be able to continue to get funds to do their work. And medics like you know.

Mary Lawlor 11:15

The terrible thing about medics in in countries like Egypt and Russia, they've been punished for speaking out against the virus, as have journalists have, you know, so and then, of course, there's the prisoners, you know, all the human rights defenders who are in jail, Azimzhan Askarov his last appeal to the Supreme Court has been denied.

Tom Pegram 11:35

Where? Which country was that in Mary?

Mary Lawlor 11:38

That was in Kyrgyzstan.

Tom Pegram 11:41

Right.

Mary Lawlor 11:41

That happened and he's quite elderly and frail. He's been in prison since 2012. And then there's, for example, in Iran, there's three women, Nasrin Sotoudeh, Atena Deami. Atena Deami, was supposed to be released just the 4th, which I think was last Saturday, after serving five years, but they, they brought her to court and put another two years on her sentence, one was for the disrupting prison order, and one year and the other was kind of enemy of the state stuff. So she's just got another two years and Narges Mohammadi, who has a very long prison sentence is also there. So, you know, there's so many issues that arise solely from COVID are maybe not always solely from COVID, but exacerbated by it.

Tom Pegram 12:33

I mean, you know, I think it's characteristic of your work or your approach, that you're very close to the ground and, and that you are seeking to reach out and to be present with these people's situations in all sorts of different countries. And I wonder whether I mean, COVID has obviously dominated now the agenda, but it seems as if it is really accelerating, what were already quite serious acute human rights issues in these settings. And I do wonder to what extent, you know, there's, we often talk about shrinking space for civil society, human rights defenders, as if the 1990s were some kind of Halcyon age, if you will. I mean, in your view, to what extent do we see acceleration or sort of continuity or continuity of, of human rights, pushback, and perhaps quite sophisticated attempts to repress human rights advocacy? Or do we actually see something new emerging when it comes to the sort of threat environment that's faced by human rights defenders?

Mary Lawlor 13:37

Well it's always very difficult to be to be categoric about this, because on the one hand, we've been seeing the shrinking space for many years now, I think there's about 84 countries that have brought in laws, you probably know better than I do. But I know, you know, that fortress, what is it? ICNL isn't that the, they're tracking it with the, with the Special Rapporteur and counterterrorism, they have a project, great website for any of your students. And so you can see how these laws have been brought in to neutralise and prevent human rights defenders from carrying out their legitimate work. And in your introduction, you said the right to defend human rights. And that's a message that I think we have to keep really, you know, plugging that everyone has a legitimate right to defend human rights. So I mean, if you were to ask me, you see, I started in the 70s. And like, in the 70s there was no internet, you know, everything was written. And I remember in an urgent case, I was with Amnesty International at the time. There was one fax machine in Dublin that an Amnesty member had and there were more than one but there were, you know, fax machines had just come in and the only person in Amnesty that we knew was a solicitor who had a, a fax machine. So I'd race over it to his office, you know, and send a fax. And it was like, nowadays, you have such advantages. You know, I know there are terrible disadvantages, but there are great advantages to the internet, to the speed at which information can be shared, or I'm not talking about fake information. But I also remember with just Gina McCorkle, a woman in Zimbabwe who was disappeared. And it was the Zim lawyers for human rights that were working on our case. And in those days, I was in Am-. This was about 30 years ago, and those days, you know, you'd be trying to ring up to find out what's going on, and the lawyers would be busy, and they wouldn't want to be talking to people all over the world asking what's going on, you know, and you'd be trying to follow the information. And then when Facebook came in, they set up a page, and because this woman was she, she was often, you know, at threat. And, and they set up a page, sorry,

the first time she hadn't been disappeared, but the second time when Facebook was up and running, they set up a page, and it was great. They just posted stuff on the page, and you could see it immediately, you know, and that's a great tool for human rights work. And there are more and more people involved in human rights work now than there ever were before. But if you were to look back at the 70s, like, sure the place was surrounded by dictatorships, you know, you had all the generals running Latin America, you had a dictatorship in Indonesia, you had apartheid in South Africa. The Soviet Union, you know, had most of Eastern, controlled most of Eastern Europe and beyond. So like, it wasn't, it wasn't. It was really bad then, too, you know, and yes, gains were made. Probably, there was a short window, but violations are always with us, will always be with us, I think, you know, and so I wouldn't think that it's insurmountable at all.

Tom Pegram 17:24

I mean, maybe that historical perspective, brings home just how high the stakes are, though. How important is to fight the battles, to hold the line, and to try and prevent slight backsliding in terms of civil liberties and human rights protections, a lot of talking about, you know, a new Cold War 2.0, a retreat into a nationalist populism, a liberal politics, and clearly that is a... That is potentially very serious for human rights protections.

Mary Lawlor 17:59

Yeah. And well, I mean, one doesn't like to be rude about some of the populist presidents that we have around the place. And of course, they're all learning from each other as well. And each one seems to encourage the other. And there is a retreat. And there's no doubt about that. But you know, Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, he said, we were put on in this world to improve civilization. And my friend, Frank Jennings, who sadly died of a brain tumour, one of my best friends and mentors, he said to me, I'll always remember him saying, to me, "Mary, we have to choose civilization every day." And there are really like, I mean, there are more good people than bad people in the world. So like, it's not all bleak and hopeless. And I suppose the thing is, we have to, as you say, fight, to arrest this kind of slide back against international standards by reminding governments that they have agreed to, you know, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the covenants, all of that kind of stuff. And, and they, they, they are, they have international obligations, they freely accepted. Now how they choose to exercise those international obligations, of course, is a different matter. And it seems to me that it's a kind of like, it's all very well you can be very- I always get amused when a government that is not perfect, points the finger at another government. And, and it was and, and it's almost like, you know, And they're... But they're quite genuine. But when it comes to their own stuff they can't take it. And they don't. It's not as if they have. They're not thick skinned, you know that governments know they're not perfect. They know, there's an awful lot they are doing wrong. They know they should be improving. They know they should be sticking to international standard. They know that they have said they accept, you know, international standards and have ratified many international standards. But their idea of implementing them, when it suits them because of their political and strategic interests. They don't.

Tom Pegram 20:37

I mean, on that note of holding governments to account, of course, you now find yourself being a sort of insider/outsider within the UN system. I mean, Kofi Annan, has described the UN Special rapporteurs as the crown jewels of the human rights regime. And I'd be curious to know, did you have a good sense

of what the role would entail before being appointed? And how have you found it? How are you approaching the task of, you know, strategizing, as well as outreach to government, as well as obviously, not giving up on basic principles?

Mary Lawlor 21:10

Yeah, well, it's a, it's difficult at the moment, because there's no meetings, and you know, everything is online. But for example, and I have to, I think this is the third time in my life, I've had to reinvent myself, because the first one, I think, well, you know, when I joined Amnesty as a director, or as Chairperson it was in those days, because we didn't have a paid staff for several years, and yeah, so it was completely voluntary, when I joined, and, and then I got money. So we got an office and started to build Amnesty in Ireland, and all of that. And, and then, so then you were part of a big institution, like Amnesty is a big institution and quite bureaucratic in its ways. So you have to work within the framework of that institution. And I remember getting into trouble the odd time. And then I left to set up Frontline. And I realised that you really had to change your mindset completely. Because if human rights defenders are in danger, you can't be hanging around forever, you know, writing a letter, and hoping something good happens, you have to act very quickly and in a flexible way. So then anyway, so now I'm special rapporteur, and that is completely different. Again, it has elements of, I suppose, of the institutionality of Amnesty International, in the old days, it's probably changed much more now. And, and it has nothing of Frontline, you know, because Frontline was a very, IS a very fast, flexible organisation. The UN is beset by rules, by procedures, by what you're allowed to do, what you're not allowed to do. So I am trying to learn how to navigate the system at, the UN system is really, it's really difficult, as far as I'm concerned, you know. And I'm trying to work out what is the added value that I can bring as special rapporteur, and I think the added value that I can bring is the increased access to governments, that perhaps I'll be able to make small differences to human rights defenders, and I'm also bringing an activist approach and a people centred approach to the mandate. So I don't know how I'm going to get on. And it's quite, it can be quite daunting, for example, Costa Rica, which is a country that isn't bad at all, the ambassador of Costa Rica, asked me lately to change, a press release I'd written, you know, in which the word impunity was used. And I read the press release, and I decided I'd take out a quote that had impunity in it. And because I had said pattern of impunity. And I thought that wasn't fair. And but, I left it in the headline of the press release. But these are the, like she rang me to ask me to do this. So these are the kinds of push backs you're getting, you know, from states and she was very nice about it. She made it clear she wasn't trying to interfere with the independence of the mandate, but she wanted to, she wanted basically to give me information about what the government was doing. And that is, I think the role. You know, if you can, if you can bring the concerns of human rights defenders to governments, and you can get them to put in place something a bit better than they have to help protect these human rights defenders? Well, that's the most you can hope for. But the UN as a protection agency, wouldn't you know, it's not set up. It's not designed to be like that, I think.

Tom Pegram 25:32

Yeah. I mean, I wonder how many government officials were ringing you up at Frontline Defenders to complain about annual reports or to, to seek to inform your views? I guess that is quite a contrast.

Mary Lawlor 25:47

And yeah, no, nobody, you know, you did all the running in, in Frontline to governments, but really, there were only you know, you just wrote off to your oppressive government about whatever case it was or your European Union about, you know, whatever it was, and that you'd like them as the EEAS delegations to take action, but it was always very, at a distance apart from the ones you knew, like the ones that have human rights defenders as a priority, like Ireland and Norway and a few like that. But, but here, like, I'm hoping that and of course, in Geneva, you would meet some, some ambassadors that they'd also, they would speak to, I used to go into the council and I would go up to them where they were sitting and ask them, could I have a word with them? And you see, there's, they're very well trained, and they're very polite. So they'll always say yes. And certainly, I always remember I was very proud. The Iranians introduced me to the Chinese and told them that they should talk to me because I was a good woman.

Tom Pegram 27:04

That's quite the recommendation.

Mary Lawlor 27:08

It's funny.

Tom Pegram 27:09

I, you know, I, when we look at the UN, it seems as if the sort of global Samaritans the Costa Ricas, the Norways are a bit of a dwindling community. And there's a lot more ambivalence, if you will, among countries who previously were really sort of important referent points for human rights, I think defenders and protections within the UN system. I wonder whether, you know, for some, that's been a bit of a shock, you know, that sort of the 1990s more than nine sort of beacons of human rights. And we can think of a number of very powerful countries that perhaps have shifted away from that position in recent years. But given your experience of working with, with human rights defenders in unstable, dangerous contexts, having to try and appeal to political leaders who perhaps don't, would rather just not know about human rights violations or just don't care about them. I wonder whether that does give you a little bit more insight into how to apply pressure in this more challenging context.

Mary Lawlor 28:16

Well, you know, I'm reminded of this wonderful Israeli human rights defender. He ran, he was Rabbis for Human Rights, I can't remember his name. But I remember at you know, we were, we were talking in Jerusalem. And he said to me, "Mary," he said, "In the old days, I was very strategic about everything I would think it out, I would say, this is what I have to do. And I would do it. Now," he says, "I just scatter everything and hope something kind of sticks." And you know, there's a lot, there's a lot to be said for that. Because you never know, in my life, I've found you never know what will bring a small change. I mean, if you look at Ireland, for example, when I was director of Amnesty, we had the death penalty. We had, we didn't have the ratification of the covenants. Until the 70s, there was a bar on married women in 73, a bar on married women, so they had to give up their jobs once they were married, you know, that would they couldn't sit on juries, there was no access to contraception. Now we have equal marriage, and we have access to reproductive rights. So things do move on, you know, they can go back in the gun and I always think with Latin America, you know, when all those changes were there,

and bit by bit, the countries became more democratic. Obviously, they are not you couldn't call a lot of them proper democracies, but at least they're not full dictatorships and you aren't having all those people in Argentina going missing or, you know, bodies dropped over the sea or the slaughter of Mayan villages or, you know, that sort of thing. So and the UN has withstood everything. Despite all these political, political challenges along the way, depending on whether it was the Cold you know, depending on what it was, but they seem to have come through difficult times before, like, they survived the Cold War, for example. And, you know, it's difficult, but I think that all you can do is keep plugging away, you have to be resilient, and you have to be persistent, and you have to keep doing it.

Tom Pegram 30:44

As they say, if the UN didn't exist, someone would have to create it.

Mary Lawlor 30:48

Exactly, yeah.

Tom Pegram 30:49

There's some truth to that. I also, I think, as you're suggesting, you know, it's important not to get too swept away by the current historical juncture, to put it into that kind of that longer sweep and, and have context. I think there's a lot of colleagues, myself included, who are who are looking at the multilateral system, and really seeing that it is it is creaking, particularly when it comes to providing these kinds of protections, human rights protections, other public goods, such as, say, biodiversity preservation, climate change, and so on. And I mean, to the extent to which some of those transnational challenges perhaps exceed the potential of a system premised on nation state governments, there might be this, there might be a, I suppose, a new generation of challenges and risks, which are going to require real innovation, and real, a lot of hard thinking about how to galvanise decentralised networks, transnational action, that in a way, I suppose operates beneath around the not sort of multilateral system, but ultimately multilateral system, I imagine will remain an important part of the solution.

Mary Lawlor 32:17

Yeah, I mean, if you look at the big multinationals, the big transnationals, you know, they're more powerful than governments in many cases. And, and, like, even last week, I was talking to somebody and the local police were being corrupt-, being paid off by the companies, you know, so, and this is happening, you know, we all know about the link, the corruption link between business and governments and local officials, and all that sort of thing. But again, even in that area, and I do think there has to be a twin track approach, you know, I don't think there's much point in trying to reinvent the system, I think, if you just stuck to what you had, and, and did it in, and implement it, you know, the rules about how people should behave, because they're there. It's not as if they're not there. But they don't use- Okay, you could spend an awful lot of time trying to think about well what will you come up with that would make people behave better. And, and what would happen? In my view, you'd still be stuck with the implementation because it's people, governments, you know, their, I really truly believe, you know, their political and strategic interests. And their, and also, I'm afraid that whole notion of power corrupting, you know, we're not going to make sense out of these people, you know, so, um, so but with business and human rights, like, there are there are moves afoot. I mean, there is the draft, UN Global Treaty on business and human rights. I know that won't be for a long time, and even then it

won't probably be implemented. But, but there is a drive, you know, they're like, there's 175 investors led by the Investor Alliance for Human Rights, and which include asset managers and pensions and public funds and faith based institutions. And these were representing \$4.5 trillion. And they've sent a letter to 95 major multinational companies calling for improved performance and disclosure on human rights due diligence, like that kind of thing is new and that's growing. This whole thing about ESG in investing is growing. On the other hand, like you saw the European Commissioner is going to bring in mandatory human rights due diligence for the EU next, 2021. So again, they're small steps, but they're important steps. And certainly in some of the Latin American countries, you know, they, they are concerned about the rise of this, the influence of companies and of course, China is eating up everywhere and all these Canadian, actually, in a couple of weeks, I'm going, I've been asked to talk to three companies in Colombia, Glencore, which, of course, has a rotten record, can't remember the other two, I haven't done my research on it all yet. But this, again, is a sign that they feel they want to engage with you. They want to, what they say now is. I know, it's a lot of it is what I call, it's probably mean of me, but you know, corporate social responsibility. They all love to play corporate social responsibility, but not business and human rights. And I think Corporate Social Responsibility is all about PR, and trying to make yourself look good in the community. Now, obviously, that there are things that are very valuable, like when they get involved in the community and help with painting schools or giving health care to somebody or whatever, that's all good. But it's from the bottom down, it's not from the ground up. And the whole thing about business and human rights, it is from the ground up, it's putting the communities affected by whatever a company is doing at the centre and insisting they have free prior informed participation. And that the structures that are produced by the company is even in a language that they understand, you know. But again, like 10 years ago, no company would have been wanting to talk to you about how can they improve their performance in Colombia?

Tom Pegram 37:03

I mean, Colombia is one of the deadliest places in the world for human rights defenders. And there is certainly a lot of conflict around extractive operations in that country and others in the region, of course, and the reticence of business to engage human rights agenda, I imagine might be because human rights invokes legal obligations, although, of course, when it comes to say, pillar three of the guiding principles, pillar three is often the kind of the right to remedy that's the one that sort of falls through the cracks, often, because of very dysfunctional judicial systems. The problem is, is deeply rooted, and it does engage issues around essentially, domestic politics, justice and human rights. And the UN is, of course, can be quite a distant pair in that, in that political contest.

Mary Lawlor 37:57

Hmm. Yeah. And I mean, I think the, that there are a couple of things that come to mind there. I mean, the UN is definitely under threat. Because, you know, there are so many big players who aren't paying their dues for a start. So it's completely bankrupt as far as well, not completely bankrupt, but it's got severe budgetary issues. And, and you have a secretary general at the moment who, who is, in many ways afraid to speak out. And you have a High Commissioner for Human Rights, who in my view, was brought in more as a politician, rather than Zeid, the previous High Commissioner for Human Rights, who was very outspoken. So you see this kind of this trend throughout the UN. And, and, and that is deeply worrying. There's no way around it.

Tom Pegram 39:07

And it's worrying perhaps also because it's quite easy for academics and others, to retreat into questions of legal obligation. When, for instance, in my recent research in the Philippines, I was struck by the amount of support that Rodrigo Duterte has in the general public. And it's not really about human rights as legal claims. It's about it's about having to engage in, you know, robust political and moral argumentation to drive forward political struggles.

Mary Lawlor 39:37

Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I don't know if you read the report on the Philippines that OHCHR did, was actually really great. Right down to the threats that human rights defenders we're getting, we got a whole load of, I mean, we asked for them because we were in touch with Philippine defenders but we also got the ones that were in the OHCHR report, because they're very graphic, and you can see them. And that man, I mean, it is extraordinary. These populist presidents, they seem to have tapped into something where they have the support of society. And this is, you know, this is I mean, it's extraordinary that, for example of health workers, we were talking to health workers in the Philippines, who were in danger because of their work. And he has them red-tagged. He says, they're all communists, and they're enemies of the state. And you know, and he actually, in one speech, said that he was coming after human rights defenders, I can't remember the exact wording, whether he said they should be killed or not. But it was like a serious threat. And, and, and that kind of stuff. You do wonder, when you talk about all of this, it seems to me that the legal framework going back to what you were saying, you know, putting everything in the legal framework isn't enough. You have to find creative ways. And I think that you need, I think we have to start with the children, I think we have to do really serious human rights, education with children from the word go, I think we have to use the arts, I think we have to have different entry points into human rights, where people will understand that they're really talking about protecting the rights of the people they love and themselves.

Tom Pegram 41:37

And then in a climate context, you know, certainly placing children's rights at the heart of that agenda, you know, what will the world look like in 2050 from a human rights perspective? How will that impact your children? Surely that you, you would imagine that would resonate?

Mary Lawlor 41:53

Well, you would imagine, but so far, but you know, I don't, I don't know, there seems to be a growing movement, as you know, yourself, of young people and children, who have adopted climate change as the issue that they're most concerned about. And certainly, they are beginning to, to mobilise in different countries. For me, I've been asked about, you know, the definition, is it okay, it's enough if they're just defending their own rights? But for me, it isn't. They have to be defending the rights of others. So for example, one of the examples of that is on this child rights webinar the other week, an example that somebody gave asked me like, a three school girls going to the Father, of a friend of theirs that was going to be sold off as a child bride, would they be human rights defenders? And I said, "Yes, they would be human rights defenders, particularly if they were harassed or intimidated by the Father." But if it there's, it's very, it's a very difficult it's a loaded, children as human rights defenders, is, it's tricky. You know, at what stage how, you know, do they have progressive autonomy? Are their parents, you know, what is the role of parents in deciding what they should and shouldn't do all that

kind of stuff? It's very tricky. But back to the back to the legal standard. I mean, if you talk about presenting human rights in a different way, I agree with you fully, that we should get rid of the language. Because I do think that is inaccessible to a lot of people. I've started the, you know, I've started to talk about health workers, both doctors, nurses, porters, cleaners, anybody who has put themselves in danger during COVID as human rights defenders, in a way to, I suppose show that people who are- because everyone owed the doctors and the nurses and the cleaners and the porters certainly in around Europe and North America and also in Africa and Asia, you know, you could see it. Actually, there were a group of 14 nurses were arrested for protesting in Uganda yesterday, because they didn't have enough personal protective equipment. But you can see how the idea of if you can make a link, I think anyway, if you can make a link between people that people look up to, you know, as human rights defenders try and I really don't know how you get rid of this support and the way these populist presidents managed to reach people by playing on their fears, I really don't know how you get that. We're working with Facebook at the moment about online threats, and trying to work out how we can stop with Facebook's help, online traps are routine at that point.

Tom Pegram 45:26

Oh, that sounds like a really important focus for, for our students to perhaps keep in mind as to while these are frontier concerns for practitioners in the human rights field, I know you've got a pressing engagement, Mary, with a government delegation shortly, but I just want to perhaps finish with a question directed towards our student audience. What do you think a student needs to become a specialist in human rights today? And how can they best orientate themselves to understand the real challenges that are confronting human rights defenders? Or put it differently? What questions should they be asking?

Mary Lawlor 46:05

I mean, I'm afraid you're probably asking the wrong person because I learned everything as I went along. You know, I got into human rights kind of by default. Sean McBride, who was a, who was a barrister here and he won actually won the Nobel Peace Prize, the American Medal of Justice and the Lemon Peace Prize, he was one of the founding members of Amnesty. I knew him. So it was kind of by default, I got involved. And then you know, bit by bit you, you can, it drags you in, and you realise that you can do something. And the questions will come to you as you go along. You know, there's a, there's a fantastic quote, let me... Can I just get it because I looked it up for my daughter. You have to get it on this. I sent it to myself. There's a fantastic quote that I sent my daughter today, because I wanted her to I just wanted her to have it. I thought it would be good for her. Sorry.

Tom Pegram 47:26

We should put Seamus Heaney in the in the show notes as well. He's got some good poetry.

Mary Lawlor 47:33

Yeah. First. Yeah, "Concerning all acts of initiative and creation. There is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans, that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves through. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred, a whole stream of events, issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unseen incidents, meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed

would ever have come his way." And I think for a student, you - don't get bogged down in Oh, God, how do I work this out? How do I work that out? How will I apply this legal framework? How will I do that? Make the decision but you want to do something, and then learn as you go along, get a, you know, get country experience, go and work with some people on the ground, if possible, just to get a feel for the for the daily lived reality of human rights defenders, rather than learning about it from textbooks, and getting immersed in all the legal standards, which you still need to be able to apply. But bringing it down to a level where you can see what they're doing, why they're doing it and how they're doing it. And, and I think that way, that way, it will just, it will become clearer as they go along. And you don't have to know everything immediately. You just do learn it as you go along. There's a line in the Theodore Roethke poem "I learn by going where I have to go." And I think that's really all you can do. You know.

Tom Pegram 49:31

Well, I guess if we knew all the answers, you know, it wouldn't be such a mess. But it's that sounds like good advice. You keep an open mind. Keep learning.

Mary Lawlor 49:42

Yeah.

Tom Pegram 49:43

Great.

Mary Lawlor 49:43

Well, yeah, I suppose so.

Tom Pegram 49:46

Great. Well, thank you so much, Mary, for your time. Really appreciate it. I hope we'll get another chance to chat. Best wishes. Good luck with the work and, and yeah, we'll be following. We'll be following your work. What's going on. Thanks so much.

Mary Lawlor 49:59

Thanks a million. Okay, bye.

Tom Pegram 50:04

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