

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

would be if then if they were going outside. And women, human rights defenders, particularly in patriarchal countries were often the threats c

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

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

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, e

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 actual

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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