ESRA'A EL SHAFEI

Esra'a Al Shafei 00:00
When things are closed, you see that there's a lack of trust. You see that also closed is often as a result of the need for control. You need to control the users. You need to control the data. You need to control and centralise information. And so that to me was never exciting. It was just reliving and digging deeper into more and more corporate models that don't serve society, don't serve humanity, don't serve any form of justice.

Esra'a Al Shafei 00:08
Hello, and welcome to Inspiring Open, candid conversations with influential women whose careers and open ethos have pushed the boundaries of what it means to build community and succeed as a collective. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu, a journalist and women's rights advocate. Join me as I explore the fascinating backstories behind Africa's most tenacious female personalities.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 00:16
Inspiring Open is a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women, a project of Wiki In Africa. Be inspired, be challenged, be bold! My guest today is Esra'a Al Shafei, a Bahraini Human Rights Activist. As a teenager, Esra'a saw a migrant being mistreated, and she knew she had to do something about it. Since then, she has spent her entire life building digital platforms that amplify underreported and marginalised voices in the Middle East and North Africa. Her work includes Mideast Tunes, a web and mobile application for independent musicians in the MENA region, who use music as a tool for social justice advocacy. There is also Ahwaa.org, a discussion tool for Arab LGBTQ+ youth, which leverages game mechanics to protect and engage its community, and Migrant-Rights.org, the primary resource on the plight of migrant workers in the Gulf region. Esra'a has shown sheer bravery and resilience when it comes to promoting human rights, and we are honoured to have her on Inspiring Open today. Let's get right into it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 01:18
What misconceptions do people have about the Gulf countries that you would want to set straight?

Esra'a Al Shafei 02:18
When people think about the Gulf, oftentimes they think about unearned wealth. And of course, there's some of that, but the majority of the people in the Gulf work very hard. It's just a place where it's very community oriented as well. It's not as materialistic, as people make it out to be. When people think of the Gulf, oftentimes, it's only Dubai. I mean, it's not even Abu Dhabi, other parts of the UAE, let alone other countries in the Gulf. Or it is Saudi Arabia, where everything is completely

oppressive, and youth don't have a creative spirit. Where a lot of them do risk a lot of what they have in order to have a creative outlet, whether it's through film or through music, we have a very healthy and vibrant, independent scene for young creators. So I think of the Gulf is a very creative and spirited place.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 03:21
What did you study in school? And, did you always know you wanted to be in the tech space, let alone the activism space?

Esra'a Al Shafei 03:29
In school, I studied Political Science. I was excited at learning about international relations, politics, policies, why we are in the position we are. And of course, studying this had its own biases, depending on what books you were forced to read, what essays you were forced to write. So I didn't like that part of it. I didn't like the restrictiveness of academia. And that's actually how I got excited and interested about technology because it was limitless. I chose what information I wanted to look for, rather than be given a specific assignment to be told, this is the opinion you should have, and these are the books you need to be learning from. And they have to be approved by the Ministry of Education, for example. So in that sense, sometimes education is within the same line as propaganda. You're being taught what leadership, wherever you are, wants you to be exposed to, and you really can't question much.

Esra'a Al Shafei 04:42
When I started using the internet in my early teens, it was at a school library, and again, we were told what to search for and to write a report about that. And at the time, we're using Ask Jeeves, some of the older search engines to look for this information and then to create a GeoCities website so that we have a grasp on how to create some of this, how to publish, some of this content, and make it accessible to other people in our school. But actually was making it accessible to everybody in the world. And that wasn't emphasised. But quickly, I learned that I could send this to somebody all the way in China, all the way in Belarus, or wherever, and they would get the same information. They would look at the same website that I was looking at. And, to me that was really empowering. And that's how I started really dabbling with building platforms. I started, of course, GeoCities, some of the more traditional website creators at the time that were very limiting. Eventually more and more, Drupal, Joomla. And then finally, WordPress was the where I ended, because that just opened a completely different framework for how limitless and how endless, but also how accessible, it was to be a creator without really needing to have IT or Computer Sciences there as your background, because a lot of it could be self taught. If I didn't have a plugin for something, I would either go to a YouTube page and learn how I could develop one. If it was something a bit more involved, I would obtain the support of the WordPress Community Forum where people were very supportive and responsive. And that really just opened up the avenue for me to connect on a much deeper level where I started creating these platforms to invite different opinions and perspectives and thoughts. Because I was never interested in just having a blog or a website only for me to express to the world my opinion. I was actually more interested and learning what others thought, because I felt at the time, I didn't know much. So who am I to go there and just express myself without it being informed? Because I knew that what I was reading was propaganda. I knew it had to be questioned. I didn't know how, and I didn't know where to look for those alternatives.

Esra'a Al Shafei 07:03

And that's really what the Web represented to me, was that limitless opportunity for endless learning. As well as very powerful collaboration, especially with marginalised communities we were not encouraged to have a connection to: communities like the Kurdish community, for example; the Bahá'í minority in a lot of Muslim majority countries that were severely persecuted. We were just told to listen to the stories, forget them, or just deny their existence altogether, because it's their fault not conforming to the norms, or for being different, that they deserved to be punished. So I really wanted to learn from them, rather than read about them from mainstream media and just have that be my only outlet of information.

Esra'a Al Shafei 07:58
So I started creating these platforms, Bahairights.org for example, Kurdishrights.org, you know, and so on, and so forth. And each website would invite Kurdish writers, Bahá'í writers, and the idea is that these are members of our communities who have been silenced, censored, surveilled, punished merely for being different. So I wanted to be sure that they have the outlet that they needed, and that they could also feel that sense of empowerment without necessarily having to also learn to be a creator, as long as they knew how to sustain the platform. So that for me was very important, was to make sure that the platforms that we create aren't being just for us, but it's also for others to be able to take, to iterate, to expand upon, and for their stories to be accessible.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 08:49
Since you're talking about platforms. Let's continue with the ones that you've built, particularly the ones under Majal. Let's start with MigrantRights. You started MigrantRights, because as a child, you witnessed the abuse of a migrant, right?

Esra'a Al Shafei 09:10
That really also is what started my journey into self discovery as well because, I was nine years old where I really started opening my eyes to the injustices that we were surrounded with. And that's very unfortunate, and it happens throughout the Gulf, that migrant workers are treated like less than a Gulf citizen, or a global North expat. They were abused in many ways. The stigma of them speaking out was always unacceptable. There were no avenues for them to fight for their rights. So what ends up happening is that they become literally enslaved in our society and that slavery actually becomes completely legalised and normalised. That there's a sense of ownership of an employer that can abuse them, and completely escaping accountability for that, merely because of who that individual is, where they're from, and the nature of their work, such as domestic worker, or construction worker, or even a farmer. And when I started speaking up about this, in school, I was told this is not the place for it. At home, I was told you have to be careful, because this can put you in trouble. Anywhere you go in society, people really rejected that notion that this is your problem to fix. Let the government figure it out. Let the workers figure it out. Or let the sending countries that these workers belong to get involved and figure it out. This is not our problem. But it was! Because our infrastructure was being built off our backs. They were building our homes, they were building our schools, our hospitals, our roads. So without them, economically, financially, just in many different ways, we wouldn't be where we are today. And so, a lot of what you see in places like Dubai or Abu Dhabi or Doha or even Manana, a lot of these places, they were able to flourish, often as a result of this type of exploitation. Of course, they will be seen as these places that are investing, but at the same time, it's because they are either severely under-paying, abusing, overworking, or sometimes not paying a lot of workers their due wages. When massive towers were being built throughout the UAE, during these periods, a lot of migrant workers were also committing

suicide. They were also denied Legal Aid, denied health care denied even the right to go home, because their visas would expire and their employer wouldn't take care of that. And sometimes they would have to choose between homelessness and despair, or imprisonment. Some of them can't even afford to be deported, because they would be forced to pay that fee. So they can't even go home and be reunited with their family, even if it would be at a financial loss.

Esra'a Al Shafei 12:23
Some people lose their lives and their families don't even know about it, because their bodies are just discarded as if it's nothing, as if that person's life doesn't matter. So I felt, every time I would walk into a place, a park, a school, I would have that guilt that I'm complicit. For that reason that's where really I turned to the internet as one of those mediums that I could use to expose and document these rights abuses. So the Migrantrights.org platform was founded in 2010. And ever since it's been collecting, and curating, and documenting information. But now we have also expanded to connecting migrant workers with on-the-ground resources for relief support, urgent care and whatnot. So that's something that really emboldens, for me, the power and impact of online collaboration and networking. Because doing this, at the scale that we are, really required us to build those underground connections in each of those Gulf countries, which was not going to be possible. I was not going to travel to Saudi Arabia, and advertise that I'm looking for advocates, because that would put me at risk. I will be deported. I would be banned from other GCC countries. I would be, worse, imprisoned. So I had to be super cautious about how I go about doing this while protecting myself, while protecting my team, which is why I'm also physically anonymous on the Web. That's one of the things that I do, in order for me to protect myself, to protect my family, so that when I'm out and about in Bahrain, I'm not immediately targeted as this individual who's doing all of this controversial work.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 14:08
Esra'a, even as you talk, I can just sense the passion in your voice and the way you articulate this. I believe tackling this migrant issue was not easy, because it sounds like it's a system that people are benefiting from it. What would you say are some of the challenges you have faced in trying to be the voice and be the support that you can be for migrants?

Esra'a Al Shafei 14:34
Censorship was a major one, because when we started, my advocacy was angry. And I realised quite quickly that that backfired. It was not in favour of the migrant workers, because people would just dismiss it as: that's just angry advocacy. Of course, you are enraged with a lot of what's happening. But when you express that anger, and you put it that this is beyond expressing, that this is unacceptable, oftentimes the way that I was formulating things, even alongside my team, the way we strategized about things was just mere exposure, no solutions. And people didn't want that, because it just gave them a burden. How do they just want to sit there and read about one abuse after the other? It's depressing. They don't want it. So we had very low traffic, we had very low engagement, people didn't want to participate, and worse, the government was blocking our websites. Which meant that we couldn't reach the people that we wanted to reach, including the migrant workers, oftentimes, who would want to reach out for support.

Esra'a Al Shafei 15:35
For this reason, we started re-strategizing and exploring ways that we could be more collaborative with, and more diplomatic, in our approach to this issue, and started also involving a lot of young

advocates in university usually freshmen who are just starting out, and they really want to get involved, but they also don't want to get in trouble. We felt that people were avoiding us because they were scared, not because they didn't care about the issue. It's not as if nobody cared. So many people cared, but there was that sense of helplessness as I care about how do I help and what do I do. And we weren't giving that outlet, we were just telling them what the problem was, which serves the purpose of documenting the information, but it doesn't serve the purpose of change, when you actually want to have turned that information into legitimate advocacy that is resulting in direct impact. And that requires time, it requires persistence, it requires iteration. I learned the hard way that these things were not as overnight as oftentimes you hear about, that somebody goes out in a protest, and later, some Minister resigns. These things do happen, but it's rare when it's something this systemic. Because this is not a single individual that was causing this issue. It was social, it was baked into how society at large functions, how our economy functions, and it had implications for people, financially, culturally, and so on. So the root of the cause was very deep, and we had to dig and dig. And that really required us to have that level of patience. And to have that diplomacy that allowed us to involve a lot of people in this conversation, that wouldn't really consider themselves to be activists. They were students, they were professors, they were actually even people working at the Ministry of Labour, who themselves would come to us sometimes and say, this is a problem. We agree, and here are some policies that we are hoping to put in place and enforce. And, of course, you take these things with a grain of salt, because you have to see, what is the government doing legitimately and genuinely to actually resolve this issue? And what are they doing merely for the sake of PR so that they could have those World Cups and host all of these events without having that relationship with "we are also abusers of migrant workers"? You see all the time, for example, things being built, whether it's universities being expanded, or the Guggenheim Museum having a chapter in Abu Dhabi, and artists completely refusing to even showcase their work there because they say first you have to pay the workers that actually built this museum. So these are the kinds of things that we had to really explore in many different directions. How to do advocacy, and how to do it differently in every single country. And instead of me, as a Baharani woman advocating for migrant workers in Kuwait, we have Kuwaitis themselves coming up and setting up events and trainings, and collaborations. And all of this was happening both online and offline. And that marriage is very important.

Esra'a Al Shafei 18:59
So that then became also more risky for us, though, because it meant that people were being targeted. And we did have writers, for example, who participated in our website, and research people that we've worked with for many years, who started disappearing. Who started being tortured. Who started being threatened. Who got deported, and never allowed to return. So that really enabled us to also pick our battles wisely, because we don't want to put other people in danger. We also need to protect the movement, so that not everything that we do is met with immediate censorship and surveillance and abuse. And as a result, we have gotten uncensored now from various websites, because we feel that our tone now is a lot more appropriate, and more importantly, fact-based.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 19:47
I think about maybe seven, six years ago, here in Ghana, the feminist movement online became very, very strong. And then a lot of people, including myself, thought that the tone was so angry, and so vile that, like you said, people would want to get involved, but they are just unsure that is the right movement to join because these people are too angry. And I understand that when you were starting out, of course, when you see the issue, sometimes your initial reaction is anger. But, for

some people, they are not able to review the work they've done, the kind of results they've had, and to adapt and change, and find what really works better. And I think that's something that a lot of movements are not able to do. So they get stuck with the anger, and they don't get the support they need, they don't get the results they want. And then they get frustrated, and then they die out.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 20:50
Completely. I would completely agree with that.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 20:53
When I read about Ahwaa, I was like, you are a risk taker. And I like that you could build a platform where people in the LGBTQ+ community can have a safe space to connect with people who are like them, who think like them, who feel like them, to share and to build each other up. And again, this is a topic that is not openly discussed where you come from.

Esra'a Al Shafei 21:24
Yeah, and this is also one of the hardest initiatives I've ever had to do, because of the sensitivities involved. And it's for that reason that it's the platform that came last. When I was building a lot of these platforms, it was migrant rights, it was dealing with marginalised communities in other settings; whether it's religious, or ethnic minorities, for example. But here, it was very challenging, because this was a literal life and death situation also, for a lot of the people, and it required complete and utter anonymity. And how do you build a platform that embraces anonymity, without it being turned into a troll factory?

Esra'a Al Shafei 21:24
So, that was something that was very difficult, because we wanted to build a place that had that sense of intimacy, that sense of community, at the same time without really knowing who you are. How we went about that when we built our platform, we started very small, it was just a couple of 100 of users. And we just tested a wide range of features. And we saw where were the trolls frequenting? Were there many trolls? If so, how do we go about making sure that this was going to be an accessible and welcoming space that people really felt invited to share very deep stories, meaningful stories about how they deal with their identity, and reconcile that with their faith, with their society, with their culture, with their upbringing. And people sometimes go as deep as wanting to be talked out of suicidal thoughts. There were a lot of wide range of issues. And there were some people there that also wanted to go and talk about music and films and just fun things. It really started to be a platform where many different things were being covered. But all of that required caution. And we wanted to be sure that we were protecting people. And it's not something that we guarantee it's not something any platform could ever guarantee, no matter how many encryption tools you're using, how many encrypted messaging tools, even if you're using signal, tomorrow something happens. Your device gets taken physically, sometimes not everybody is wiping through messages as they're going along. I mean, nobody's 100% secure, no matter what tools you're using. And if you tell users that you will be fully secure, then they will have that false sense of security, which is even more dangerous.

But one thing that really made this platform work, and in a more sustainable way, was the fact that it relied on a point system. And the point system really enables you, every time you share a story that other people find helpful, anytime you engage in a supportive way by supporting somebody there that may be needing hel, and that person says this person was helpful, you gain more points. And

based on the number of points you get, you can unlock different sections of the site. The chatroom is only accessible to people with a certain number of points. We have a restricted area for resources. If you want to access resources that is only possible with people with a number of points. And that really enabled us to limit the trolling, because then the trolls, in order to gain access to these more intimate areas, they would have to be very supportive and tolerant, and a lot of people who want to troll the LGBTQ+ community would never want to put themselves in a position to say something kind, only to be able to say something negative. So they end up leaving, because it's not worth their time. And they don't want to say anything positive. And this enabled us to run this platform without really needing a lot of moderators, without needing a lot of resources just to have things be moderated all the time. We still have a flagging system, it's not perfect. There are things that happen sometimes, and people have to flag them, maybe somebody shared their mobile number or their full name, and they didn't realise that it wasn't in a private message. OF course, it's not perfect or bulletproof. But it did help significantly. Now we have over 11,000 users and very, very little trolling, for example.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 25:51
I love all the platforms you've built, and particularly the ones that we've spoken about. But my favourite so far is Mideast Tunes because I love, love music. It initially was for underground musicians. It was to give a voice to amplify, I guess, the voices of underground musicians. Why the choice of underground musicians?

Esra'a Al Shafei 26:15
Well, first of all, I was always also in love with music. And I felt music was such a powerful and creative way for young people, in particular, to learn about other communities, and to also express our creativity to the rest of the world. And that connects to what I said in the beginning that when people think about the Gulf or the region at large, they don't think of creativity and music. They think of other things that are very stereotypical based on how we are portrayed often in media, whether it's written or in films, and so on. And I started really learning about, for example, the Kurdish community and their struggle through the eyes and voices of Kurdish Hip Hop artists. And even though you don't speak the language, you can hear the pain, you can hear the hope, sometimes the optimism, but sometimes you can really hear the pain in their stories. And I felt that that was really what invited me to learn more about what I can do to be part of those types of movements, and to really see how was I been complicit as a member of society that was also preventing them from having a voice and for denying our role of historically oppressing them, and displacing them territorially. When I was looking for more music, because people said, "Oh, if you like this artist, you will like this artist." "And if you'd like this artist, you could check out this genre as well." And I realised that each of them lived in a very different place, one of them would be in a Drupal website, one of them would be on MySpace, one of them would be… on just very different platforms, and none of them were connected. It made it very difficult for me to really keep track of who was releasing new music and who was really… how artists were even connecting with one another, because sometimes you'd collaborate with an artist, and you'd realise that they didn't know that there was also another artist that was doing something similar. And that's really where the idea of Mideast Tunes was born. And when it first started, it started only for underground musicians in the Gulf, because I felt that those were being punished a lot of the time you'd see a metal band in the newspaper, and it would be told 'the devil reaches Bahrain.' It was very negative, very discouraging, very demotivating. And I wanted to be sure that we could build something that could support and help this community thrive.

And it was actually the platform became possible as a result of a local Bahrani band called *Smouldering in Forgotten*. And they were one of the first bands that would sing heavy metal and black metal in classical Arabic, which was very unique. And this moulding of different cultures that I thought was just very interesting, and also very underappreciated and underrepresented online. I built Mideast Tunes to bring these voices together. And when I built it it stayed up for about three weeks. And I realised, well maybe new artists want to join themselves rather than me finding them and curating it on my own. We created a join button, and the next day we had 40 artists, the one after that 80, 100. The interest was very overwhelming. People wanted to join and be a part of the platform. They wanted to be discovered, but they also wanted to discover other artists. It just started expanding and now from just underground we look at what qualifies as just independent. Any independent artist, political or not, who felt that they didn't have a home in other platform would have a home in Mideast Tunes. Give or take, of course, the fact that they're not sharing racist or sexist content, for example. But for the most part, we have Apple Music, Deezer, and Rami, which is the local Spotify alternative, none of them are able to function without complying legally. And complying legally means getting rid of any artist that has a social or political implication. Getting rid of any music that would mention minorities, or marginalised communities, or the LGBTQ+ community and so on. That's really something that excited me about Mideast Tunes is that we finally have a place that we can explore the independent music scene without the lens of corporations, without the lens of government censorship, and propaganda. It's the most exciting thing we worked on. But it's also by far one of the most challenging after Ahwaa.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 31:10
I just hope that, like with many things that you've done in the past and kept going, you find ways and means to keep Mideast Tunes going, because I think, as you've identified, it's really, really needed in the culture.

Esra'a Al Shafei 31:26
Yeah, and one of the things we have actually even started to do is just earned income. We use our own income to keep it up and running, due to that lack of funding. It's not sustainable but I would rather do that than shut it down. We get a lot of artists who reach out to us and say that this platform has really been significant for them to the point where we had a Hip Hop duo, Revolution Makers, in Palestine, come to us and basically say, "We don't have much. We don't even have clean water. But if we create an album, we will give you the majority of the sales, if it meant that you could stay up and running." Those are the types of things that make you realise that that's how much meaning it has to some of those artists. We also started collaborations with studios. One of them is the Underground Producers Alliance in New York. And every year, they would pick an artist from Mideast Tunes who would have a scholarship to receive remote production training. The fact that they could share their expertise with our artists, it has been just a very treasured experience for us. We also started collaborating with, for example, the Universal Hip Hop Museum in Brooklyn. And they wanted to feature some artists from the platform as well to also help bury the stigma that you can't be a hip hop artist from the region and not also be violent, or not also be a regime loyalist, for example. It really helps give that type of awareness to others that these cultures can also … it get people excited to just learn more about cultures, they would usually completely avoid.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 33:12
It's so exciting to see the impact and the change that the work you've committed your life and your security to do is having. I'm so excited. I'm so excited for the future of Mideast Tunes. So will I be

right to say that now you've put all the platforms you create under this Majal umbrella? And what does Majal mean?

Esra'a Al Shafei 33:38
It means in Arabic, and Persian actually, creating an opportunity or creating a way. We also got excited about the name, because it was one of the few last remaining five letter domain names. It was very easy to understand just Majal.org. We decided that we've created a lot of different platforms, we have many different efforts that are happening simultaneously. And we wanted this to be the umbrella organisation or entity where all of these things can live under so that we're not running completely separate platforms. But really everything falls within one umbrella. Also, because it made sense for us to do this legally in a very cost-efficient way. That's really why we did that. And this process, it happened in 2015, where we rebranded and started putting things under one umbrella rather than running things in a silo, basically, because also the team was starting to be very disconnected from one another, and we were losing expertise as a result. And Majal just makes sense for everything to come together.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 34:55
Some investors or funders don't believe that people from the Global South, for instance, can build tech platforms, and so sometimes funding becomes a challenge. Why is that so?

Esra'a Al Shafei 35:06
This part is definitely something that's difficult for me to contain my anger. I know that I always tried to keep my advocacy not angry. Unfortunately, this is one that I'm very angry about, because there's a huge lack of trust. There's racial bias, there's sexist bias, and when it comes to women from the Global South, or members of the LGBTQ+ community from the Global South, building these platforms, we have no avenues. And that actually is why I participated in the founding of the Numun Fund, which specifically funds tech from the Global South, and from the larger world that is often ignored by corporate funders, by private foundations, and just by the normal players in philanthropy. I don't have a reason for why that is, because I feel that we have proved very much our capabilities for many years, and sometimes even 10 years you're building something, and you are trying to raise even as little as $10,000, which in the context of these types of platforms is not much. You see a small civil society organisation that just popped up in San Francisco or in DC, and immediately they get $25-million to do something that is not as widespread or international or needed. And it's very wasteful, but it's also not equitable, it's not accessible, and it's nowhere near fair the way that philanthropy today functions.

Oftentimes, they say, "Well, you don't have a proven track record." We do. They say, "Oh, it's because of sanctions and legal." First, there's no sanctions against any countries in the Gulf. And then, unless it's amongst one another, for example, Qatar, Bahrain and so on due to these interpersonal relationships, but again, sending money to Gulf based non-profits, nothing wrong with that. But to bypass that, because we kept hearing that excuse over and over again, we actually set up an organisation in the Netherlands, which made us more Global North in the sense that our legal registration is there, but because we are based in the region, and because we are from the region, that was not enough for them. We realised that this was more than just a legal restriction. This was a perceptional restriction that they couldn't trust or believe that we were capable, or that sometimes it would be more sinister. In some cases, it wasn't just due to lack of awareness. In some cases, it was due to the fact that I would genuinely believe that some funders don't want to put that power in

our hands. They want to maintain that power, because it keeps them powerful. And you start realising that once you start attending those conferences and events, that every time you want to do something that you think could be empowering your community, they would shut it down, and they would do something that would be self-empowering and self-serving. That they would be enriching only themselves. That somebody in a non-profit who are executive director of a very small organisation is getting $200,000 a year, just as a salary. And here you have major operations running at $100,000 a year with a team of 10 full timers, and you have server costs and legal costs and tax implications and all kinds of obstacles.

This is something that has never sat well with me. I've been very vocal about this and, as a result, I have compromised funding because of that. There are some funders that don't like to be shunned in this way. And there are some funders that today I refuse to work with, because I see that that has been their attitude and how they approach Global South organisations. We have just been very punished for being who we are. And it's just ironic because philanthropy is supposed to be there in service of social justice, not to even add on to the obstacles that prevent you from pursuing it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 39:30
You tweeted that asking grantees to undergo an intrusive terror check, depending on where the founders are from shouldn't be normalised protocol. Either do it for everyone or do it for none. I assumed this is in reference to funding and access to funding. Do you mind elaborating on this and what is terror check?

Esra'a Al Shafei 39:55
We have, as grantees, been asked to undergo it ourselves as founders, and for every single contractor that we work with, whether they're a developer or a part time researcher, they have made us request that they sign documents that say that they not only didn't participate in terrorist activities, but sometimes they would, based on where they're from, whether it's Saudi Arabia or Egypt or Libya, they would have to undergo a terror check of some kind. Which is basically a background check to make sure that their finances have never been funnelled to militant groups or terrorist groups and so on. And we noticed that, okay, sure, when you start a bank account and whatnot, you will have to undergo that type of background check. Now, somebody in DC or New York or Berlin or London, creating a non-profit, and requesting funding, never have they been given that. Maybe some white person in London is also funding a terrorist organisation. Maybe it's a white supremacist organisation. Why aren't they also being asked to sign these? Because we would ask. We would ask other grantees, "Is this something that you have done?" No. We would ask the funders, "How come it's only us?" And they would say, "Oh, that's just the banking system that we used, because of where you're based, this is something that we have to do. And it's also something our legal department has requested that we do as an extra precaution." Why would they say that, 'extra precaution'? That they have to be wary that maybe we have some terrorist ties, because we're also in the Gulf, and that may be that there's a lot of money being funnelled to ISIS and whatnot. There's that, and the thing is that if you want to do it, do it. If that's your policy, that's your policy, but don't make it racial based, don't make it geographic base, that if you're here, this is what you have to do. And if this is something that legally, you're required to do, find a way to make that process less intrusive, less humiliating, and less dehumanising. We have always been treated extremely differently, because of where we are, who we are, and also who you serve. They say you can get the funding, get rid of the Syrian and Kurdish artists, for example. Or get rid of the Saudi artists or get rid of any artists that have LGBTQ + content. We're not going to do that. But funding is not what it is made to be, in the sense that a lot of them want to just be. We have to sit there and

just congratulate them all. Or we have to sit there and play their games about this nit-picking approach about who gets support and who doesn't.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 42:34
This is interesting, and I'm happy you're taking the stance, because at some point, somebody needs to take a stance against injustice. And this clearly is injustice.

Esra'a Al Shafei 42:44
It's an absolute injustice. Which is always ironic, because it's an injustice in an attempt to pursue justice. That you're trying to do things to prevent this type of marginalisation and, at the end, you get met with the same type of discrimination you would expect from oppressive regimes really.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 43:05
Activism in all shapes and forms is not easy. Being a woman leading this charge makes it even more difficult. And for you, the region you come from, the MENA region, even adds another layer of difficulty. How do you cope as a person dealing with this, because this must be so tasking on the mind?

Esra'a Al Shafei 43:30
For over a decade, I completely took my mental health for granted. And it's only recently, shortly actually before the pandemic even, that I really started realising that I was showing a lot of signs of burnout, of depression, demotivation, lack of passion for some of what I do as a result of those obstacles. Because 80% of it became just bypassing one legal or financial challenge after the other. And only 20% was actually creative output, the things that I really, really enjoy doing. The collaborations that I want to build, the partnerships I want to build. A lot of it was just day to day managing also the stress levels of my own team, because when we have legal struggles it implicates them, when we have financial struggles it implicates them. It has always been an uphill battle. What really kept me grounded was just, sometimes you need to know when to walk away, when to take a break, when to say no to a travel request. I've spent many years saying yes to everything that came my way because I felt it's so important for marketing, visibility. We need the funding. We need to have brand recognition. None of that matters at the end of the day. You go and you pour your heart out and often the only thing that people get out of it is funding for their events, not funding for you. People would hear your story and if they get inspired, then they would fund, for example, Access Now and Rights Con. They don't think of you as, "Let's fund this organisation directly." I started realising that a lot of those networking opportunities were not really healthy. They're not healthy in general, because a lot of the time people go there and sometimes the work is not very serious. They go there just to network, get to know one another, get funding from large organisations to do very little. And I just realised that, if anything, it only added resentment, rather than just genuine need for this type of collaboration, especially that a lot of collaborations resulted in exploitation. We would end up doing the majority of the work and some large organisation in the Global North would take credit and take the funding and walk away. And I just realised that it wasn't worth it. Why would I put myself through that? And I was putting myself through that so much, because I felt it gave me credibility to continue this work. And at some point, you have to think that that's not how it should be. I didn't want to normalise that this is what a Global South founder has to do. And what they have to put themselves in a position to be exploited only to have that level of validation.

You don't need that validation. Our work speaks for itself. The existence that we've had, the uphill battle speaks for itself. Users, they would speak for themselves, what they have to say about our platforms, for the most part. Our team, we've been oftentimes working with exact same people for more than 12 years. That's what keeps me going is being reminded of what's important and why you started this. And I also took a big step back from social media, from many different things, when I felt like it wasn't useful for my perspective to be had. I didn't feel like I needed to keep up with this rat race. Today, some people think if I don't tweet 5-10 times a day, I will not be relevant. I really don't want to subscribe to that type of mentality. I don't owe it to anybody to share anything. And I just started respecting myself without needing somebody else to respect me first. And I think that took me a very long time. Since starting this work, I was 16 years old, I only really realised it much later. I'm now 34, and it's actually 35. When I really started dealing with this, I was 33. I spent that long figuring myself out, and also taking the time to slow down.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 47:48

I'm glad that you've mentioned that the validation is really in the work that you are doing, and how the people you're trying to support are attesting to the fact that this work is really needed, and is changing their lives. You don't need a big corporation from the Global North, like you've mentioned, to come and tell you that you're doing great, you're doing this, you're doing that. But you also mentioned the beauty of Open, tell me more about that.

Esra'a Al Shafei 48:15

I mean, everything we've done has been routed in Open. Everything that I've ever built has been through accessibility of an open framework. And that just made it that you can also be creator and not just a consumer. And for me, that's really the beauty of Open. In many different shapes and forms. It's just having an open framework, an open platform, an open philosophy to everything that you do, celebrates that diversity and that collaborative spirit that really gets highlighted in the type of platforms that you see today.

When things are closed, you see that there's a lack of trust, you see that also closed is often as a result of the need for control. You need to control the users, you need to control the data, you need to control, and centralise information. And so that, to me, was never exciting. It was just reliving and digging deeper into more and more corporate models that don't serve society, don't serve humanity, don't serve any form of justice. Open I think has just been such a big gift.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 49:30

Indeed, open is a gift that keeps giving. And we're glad, we're very, very happy for that. What keeps you going? There's no easy path to what you do. W is it that keeps you going despite all these difficulties and challenges?

Esra'a Al Shafei 49:47

Really good friendships. People who have been in my position, who also are trying to go through the same obstacles. They have been my support system, because you know you're not alone. But we all know that we are going through challenges and we make room for one another. It's just been a very joyful experience, sometimes just stepping in to the people that have supported you for a very long time and being able to also give back in that way. The other thing is very, very tremendous colleagues. I mean, I would be nowhere without my team. My team have just been

incredibly loyal, persistence. They've been very empathetic to everything that we've been going through and supporting one another as a result.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 50:31
I've interacted with feminist, activists, women who are doing everything to ensure that fellow women are empowered. Some of the notion, and I don't know why people think like this, because there's a thousand and one examples of women who are strong, who are pursuing a social change and making it happen, and they have love in their lives. Is that something that you've experienced? And what would you want to say to people who think or who have this kind of notion?

Esra'a Al Shafei 51:05
Well, especially, that people would say, we wouldn't have time for love or for that type of personal relationship and whatnot. In the very beginning, I was also of that belief that I am here for a bigger purpose, I'm not interested in anything like this. But, more than love, it's also just a unique partnership that is trustworthy, respectable, and something that also can keep you going. That when you are down, they pick you up. When they're down, you pick them up. It's that sort of give and take. But it starts with respect. And it's really just about finding the right person at the right time. Sometimes you find the right person at the wrong time. It takes something that requires a lot of evolving of you as a person, of you as a founder, as a creator, as whatever it is that you do in your in your professional life. And finding a way to also extend that to the personal. The nature of my work makes me a very difficult person to be with, because it's a lot of stress. It's a lot of energy that gets thrown into something beyond a relationship. It's about work and, for me, I have always been very upfront that my work really does take precedent over many different things. And that's slowly changing. But I'm not quite there yet. Am I the perfect partner? No. But I feel lucky that I'm being tolerated.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 52:48
It feels great to be tolerated.

Esra'a Al Shafei 52:50
It really is, yeah. When somebody describes and says, "Hey, how is your partner?"
"Yeah, not bad, not bad.'

Betty Kankam-Boadu 53:04
Anyway, so, what future do you want for the Gulf countries?

Esra'a Al Shafei 53:11
A future that doesn't punish differences, whether it's differences of identity of opinion, of religion, of social status. Right now, it's a very classist and racist society, speaking just for the Gulf, and even more specifically for Bahrain. Something that's a lot more open. We see no censorship, no surveillance. We do away with all of this type of repressive policies and abusive systems that punish people, again, simply for who they are. And one that embraces knowledge, one that makes knowledge accessible, equitable. Where diversity isn't something that is threatening. The ideal life is that the platforms that I'm building today would not be needed at all.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 54:02

I love it. I love this. I do wish you all the best. I'm happy that you get to enjoy life, despite the risky nature of the work you do. I'm so happy that you took this decision to not put your face out there so you can enjoy your life. I just hope that we're not living in a world that requires such an extreme measure. But it is what it is and you make do with what you are given. So yeah, once again, thank you so much. It's such an honour talking to you. And I've really, really enjoyed every bit of it.

Esra'a Al Shafei 54:38
You too, thank you so much.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 54:41
Esra'a Al Shafei, a Human Rights Activist. Esra'a, we do appreciate all the sacrifices you have made so others can have a voice and a safe space to be themselves. We don't take it for granted.

Thank you for listening to Inspiring Open, a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women. This first series of Inspiring Open was funded through the International Relief Fund for organisations in culture and education 2021, an initiative of the German Federal Foreign Office, the Goethe Institute and other partners; and an annual grant from the Wikimedia Foundation. If you enjoyed today's show, subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your podcasts so you never miss an episode. Feel free to share, rate and review us. We appreciate the support. You can also tag us in your posts. We are @WikiLovesWomen on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. I'll leave you with the words of Ntozake Shange. "Sisterhood is important, because we are all we have to stand on. We have to stand near and by each other, pray for one another and share the joys and the difficulties that women face in the world today. If we don't talk about it amongst ourselves, then we are made silent by the patriarchy. And that serves us no purpose. Until next time, look after yourselves and your sisters. And remember, be inspired, be challenged, be bold. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu and you've been listening to Wiki Loves Women, Inspiring Open.