

Transcription Episode 8 -Mary Robinson

00:00:04:12 - 00:00:41:13

Reeta

I'm Reeta Roy, and this is Transcending Boundaries, a Podcast that features deep conversations with exceptional leaders. Each episode dives into the lives of women and men who have changed their communities, their countries, and the world for the better. Join me to discover the relationships, experiences and insights that have shaped their remarkable journeys. My guest today is one whose life's work has redefined leadership, resilience, and advocacy on the global stage.

00:00:41:15 - 00:01:20:04

Reeta

Her name is synonymous with transformative impact. A pioneer for human rights. A fearless champion for climate justice, and an unwavering advocate for gender equality. She was Ireland's first female president, serving from 1990 to 1997, where she made history by breaking barriers and bringing bold ideas to life. In this role, she reshaped Ireland's presidency into a powerful platform for equality, justice and national reconciliation.

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Reeta

She was the first Irish head of state to officially visit Britain and Northern Ireland, and was at the forefront of international efforts to spotlight humanitarian crises in places like Somalia and Rwanda. The journey took her to the United Nations as High Commissioner for Human Rights. There, she was a powerful, strong voice for investigating and addressing abuses worldwide.

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Reeta

She integrated human rights into the fabric of the UN and laid the groundwork for today's ethical globalization initiatives. She has been recognized for her leadership, and was awarded the US Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama. As a founding member of The Elders, she took her mission further, working alongside figures like Nelson

Mandela and Kofi Annan, advocating for peace, ethical leadership and action on pressing global issues from Cote d'Ivoire to the Korean Peninsula.

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Reeta

She has stood with civil society leaders and heads of state, leading dialogues on human dignity and justice. Please join me in welcoming a true trailblazer, Mary Robinson. Welcome, Mary, and thank you for making the time to be here today. To talk about your life. We will just get started. Okay. All right. I'd love to begin, where it all began, which is in your home.

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Reeta

Where you grew up. Parents were doctors. It was, probably a very full family with a lot of your brothers. Would you talk about those early days and what was like growing up in your household?

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Mary Robinson

Well, because the surgery was in the house. I was conscious of, you know, patients coming in and ringing the doorbell and going into a waiting room. And the surgery was opposite the dining room. So it was all very intimate. And, my mother didn't practice medicine after five of us arrived in six and a half years.

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Mary Robinson

Good Catholic tradition. And she was also looking after my grandfather, who was living on his own on the same town, but not very well. And she was running the town basically. You know, all the voluntary activities. And she loved it. My father was more reserved and focused on his medicine and, you know, with four brothers, two older and two younger, of course, I had to learn about gender equality immediately and human rights.

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Mary Robinson

But it was actually what my parents kept saying that had more influence on me because they kept saying: Mary, you have every opportunity your brothers have. You know, you're bright, you're doing well in school. You know, you got to believe in yourself. You have every opportunity. And Irish society was telling me something very different, even if you like, you know, my brothers were altar boys.

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Mary Robinson

There was no such thing as an altar girl. And, we were a very religious Catholic family. My grandparents went to my house daily. We went every week on Sundays. And, I had to wear this awful scarf in church. I was a girl. And there was no doubt in my mind that there was a difference.

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Mary Robinson

In fact, I heard my father say, with some irritation to my mother because I listen to these conversations. My father said he'd just from a poor home where there was a midwife, but he'd come as the doctor. And then the question from the parents: Doctor, is it a boy or a child? Wow. You know, so even then you knew the boy was what mattered.

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Mary Robinson

And that was, you know, 80 years ago in Ireland and, so that brought me to a sense, my parents think I have the same opportunities. I know I don't, but that's something to work on. I have this inner sense of justice, and I think that's what carried me forward, most of my life.

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Reeta

Incredible story. Now, your parents obviously were great believers in educating you just as they did your brothers and there's a wonderful story that your father had to ask permission from the archbishop for you to attend Trinity College. Your brothers were there. Tell us a bit more about that. Why was permission required?

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Mary Robinson

Because without permission, if you were Catholic, going to Trinity was a mortal sin.

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Reeta

Aha

00:05:50:12 - 00:06:11:13

Mary Robinson

And so my brother's, he got permission for them. My two older brothers, who were also, studying medicine. And then I came forward to study law with my younger brother. And so the two of us and, my father, you know, regarded as just meeting with the archbishop, he usually offered a glass of sherry, my father said, but the politics of it was very interesting.

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Mary Robinson

The archbishop, was a very powerful figure in Irish life, in Dublin in particular, and he didn't want well known Dublin families to go to Trinity, which increasingly they were trying to do. So it was harder for the Dublin families, for rural families like us. It was much easier. It was just a glass of sherry with the archbishop and you got the permission.

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Mary Robinson

And then for my youngest brother two years later, there was no permission needed because the Archbishop changed the policy. It was no longer a mortal sin.

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Reeta

No longer a mortal sin.

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Mary Robinson

Not very convincing from a religious point of view, but all about the politics of, Ireland at the time and holding on to the Catholic University and Dublin University College Dublin. Trinity was a Protestant university, as it was perceived. A lot of students from Northern Ireland came down because of that.

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Reeta

Wonderful. But it must have been such a formative time. You did very, very well in school. You scored at the top of your class in terms of your subjects in law. And you also met someone special. Someone became love of your life. And your husband.

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Mary Robinson

Yes. My husband, Nick and myself were, classmates from the beginning. In a four year course in Trinity. And then the first year, we both got first class honors together with two others, if you like, and the four of us went and had a meal together. And that's how I kind of got to know and kind of liked Nick.

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Mary Robinson

And I knew that he was dating all the pretty girls in college, which he was over the next three years. But I was a friend and he was doing the posters, and he was artistic and ultimately started life as a cartoonist. And he, was collecting all satirical prints from the period, the golden age of caricature, as he would call it.

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Mary Robinson

And, because he got money from college followers for the posters he was doing, he could take me out from time to time. But as a friend. And then I, for my part, was forcing myself to debate in college because I really wanted my voice to get out. And I was so shy. And I often say this to young people, you know, push yourself sometimes, you know.

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Mary Robinson

And I became better at it. And on one occasion he came with me to the other university, University College Dublin, and I won the individual award, and he kissed me and I was quite shocked. He from then on pursued me basically. And I said, no, no, I want to go to Harvard and get my masters, which I did.

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Mary Robinson

And then when I came back, he had qualified at the same time as me with a law degree, but he went on to be a cartoonist for the local Irish Times and other, venues, and so when we, I fell in love with him as well. And when we started to tell my parents, my parents were not at all pleased because I had become in that year, after I came back from Harvard in 1969, I became, the read professor of constitutional and criminal law.

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Mary Robinson

And I also elected for the Irish Senate, for the university. And there are three universities, 66 university seats, three of them for, the university I was at and, all of that meant I was a senator and a professor, and therefore I was on a pedestal with my parents, I think, suffering from what I would call over love.

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Reeta

Over love. So they didn't want you marrying a cartoonist.

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Mary Robinson

And a cartoonist who was known to have dated a lot of women. And he was also a Protestant. That was probably the least significant. But it was a factor, you know, and, so they opposed the marriage and didn't come to our wedding. And, I was already well known in my maiden name, Senator Mary Burke, because I had proposed family planning, and the Archbishop of Dublin had said that this would be a curse upon the country, which was heavy stuff.

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Mary Robinson

You know, when I was 25, going on 26. And, so we got married with all his family there. One first cousin came because I needed one family member. And, I told a brother who wanted to come: No. Stay away. We'll keep the family together, away. Because I knew after we were married, that my parents would be reconciled very quickly, which they were.

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Mary Robinson

And indeed, my mother used to joke that Nicholas is her favourite son-in-law. The fact that she could only have one son-in-law and never another.

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Reeta

It's a tremendous, terrific story. You know, you've had such a career in the law arguing cases, in Ireland and in the European Court. And you faced incredible opposition, incredible challenges. How did you find it in you to take on these subjects and pursue what you knew was right?

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Mary Robinson

I had this inner sense of justice, but I really was surprised at the way in which the decision to join with two other senators to introduce a bill in the Irish Parliament in 1971 to legalize family planning. I was quite taken aback by the response. It was, to me, unexpected because the law was a mess. Married women couldn't get the contraceptive pill unless they were

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Mary Robinson

They had written permission from their doctor that they had cycle regulation problems. Women used to joke at the time that it must be the Irish weather that we all have cycle regulation problems, and, you couldn't buy or sell a condom. It was against the criminal law, but it wasn't against the law to use a condom. So, you know, and there was, a story of women going on a train to Belfast to buy contraceptives, including condoms and contraceptive pill.

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Mary Robinson

They weren't able to buy the pill because of the prescription. So they'd give us aspirin instead. They just wanted to demonstrate, you know, and, but, as Senator Mary Burke, I had become a notorious figure. And I became even more notorious as Senator Mary Robinson as the bill was introduced. It didn't even get a second reading. It wasn't ever published by the parliament.

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Mary Robinson

It was in every newspaper. Everybody knew that it was adjusting the criminal law to remove the ban. The criminal, ban on condoms. And so, I actually was affected by the hate mail that I got. And, it kind of destabilized me. I remember walking down Grafton Street in Dublin, I mean, a shopping street at the time and, being afraid that somebody was going to jump out and tell me I was a witch from hell, because that's what the letters were saying, and that I was a terrible woman, that I was undermining everything that was good about Irish life and introducing family planning.

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Mary Robinson

And there was no social media, of course. Letters. Snail mail, as I call it. And, Nick burned the letters shortly after we married. And we both regret that now because, you know, we're archivists by instinct and nature. And, it's a pity to lose, that indication of just how much nobody wanted to talk about sex.

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Mary Robinson

Nobody wants to talk about, family planning. It was just anathema to cross the political divide, basically.

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Reeta

Oh, and we're in such a different time today, clearly passing that just getting through that period of time meant that it fortified you for other things. Very much so.

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Mary Robinson

I realized, you know, you have to be prepared to do things if you really believe in them. Even if you're not popular, you must be prepared to go ahead and believe that this is the right thing to do. And then afterwards, when I had tough decisions to make, it was never so difficult.

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Reeta

It's a good lesson for all of us to know. Now you are trailblazing president. The first woman president in Ireland. You came into office with a statement that Ireland was emerging, and you cast a new light to the Irish people about what the president, the role of the president would be. Speak about that period. Here you are coming on the heels of a lot of vitriol, but you're coming into office with great popularity.

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Reeta

What was that moment like?

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Mary Robinson

Well, I think what was significant for Ireland was that somebody with my background would be elected as president. The office had been underdeveloped. If I could put it that way. It had been. My six predecessors were men towards the end of their career who were happy to take this high level post and not really do very much, but at a very high level.

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Mary Robinson

And, and the reason why I had accepted to be nominated was to say the president is directly elected by all of the people of Ireland, could do far more at the local level, at the national level, at the international level. And in my inaugural address, I tried to explain in detail how I would try to do this without knowing how I would do it.

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Mary Robinson

And as I say, the fact that I, you know, was considered as a lawyer, who took progressive cases, in courts, a senator who raised issues that were opening up doors would be like the fact that I could be elected signaled that Ireland itself had opened up. And that, I think, was a very, a very powerful moment for the country.

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Mary Robinson

And I happened to sort of personify it, but it was much broader than me. And when I traveled around the country during the election campaign, I saw what was happening in Ireland. I saw that the Common Agricultural Policy had brought money into rural Ireland, and towns and even villages in Ireland wanted the facilities that the cities had, but they couldn't afford them and the government wasn't going to provide them.

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Mary Robinson

So people volunteered and they used an Irish word called Meil. Meil is very like a Ubuntu in Africa. It's neighborly. It comes from the farming community. The B1 tractor and workers in a

field, my father used to point this out when I went on calls with them, when I was a young girl

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Mary Robinson

He'd say: Look, they're in one field, but the next week they go to the next field. And if that farmer is sick, they'd still do his field or hers, usually his field. And, I heard a lot of talk about Meil, the spirit of Meil, Meil clubs. And then I talked about it, which made me one reason why I became more popular during the campaign.

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Mary Robinson

People felt I understood what was happening. And, and I kind of evoked the spirit of, you know, doing for others, and doing for community. And I visited a lot of communities to value what they were doing, around Ireland. We had a map, that showed a balance of both where we were going geographically and for what reason.

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Mary Robinson

So we balanced everything.

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Reeta

That's fantastic. Amazing. So you must have met some remarkable people.

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Mary Robinson

Yes. And, I also had opportunities to represent Ireland abroad in a different way. I said in my inaugural address, no idea what I meant, that I felt Ireland could, you know, play a role in human rights. What did I mean, what? Well, what kind of role? And then there was the terrible famine in, Somalia in 1992.

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Mary Robinson

And I was able to go there and then go to the UN afterwards and, you know, speak in the United States about, the situation. And after that, I was the first head of state to go to Rwanda after the genocide and killing. And I had opportunities. So it was kind of an interesting time to be able to represent locally, nationally with state visits and incoming presidents.

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Mary Robinson

As I read, the more normal, traditional presidents role, and then internationally to play more of a role also on human rights and humanitarian issues.

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Reeta

You were also the first head of state to go to Britain, and you go to Northern Ireland regularly.

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Mary Robinson

That was also really very important. It surprised me when I got a number of invitations, at the end of the campaign and just after I was elected, I was invited to go to Britain to get an honorary degree from Cambridge University to work with Vauxhall Havel. The vision for the Bank for reconstruction of Eastern Europe and to visit the Irish community.

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Mary Robinson

Both governments, both the Irish and British governments, didn't know how to handle this because none of my six predecessors had ever gone to Britain for anything other than maybe flying through Heathrow to go somewhere else, or private holiday, maybe. And the reason was, of course, Northern Ireland. Under the Irish Constitution, I was the president of

Ireland. But what about Northern Ireland or the North, as so many people called it at the time?

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Mary Robinson

So that caused a problem and it was really very interesting. I was eventually allowed by the Irish government because I couldn't go abroad without their permission to take the degree from Cambridge and to work with Vauxhall Havel, but they didn't want me visiting the Irish community in London, and because that was political. And so I accepted at that time because you got to negotiate these things next time.

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Mary Robinson

I said anywhere I go, I visit the Irish community. And of course, they knew that I'd put a light on the window. Yes, for all of those who'd had to leave Ireland. And that light took on a life of its own and helped us to shape the Irish diaspora. And then the policies to reflect that followed the light.

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Reeta

That's a beautiful symbol.

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Mary Robinson

It taught me the power of symbols.

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Reeta

You know, it's a powerful, powerful symbol. Let's go. Let's go to the UN. When you were appointed High Commissioner for Human Rights, and you had to face formidable challenges

because there clearly were opposing voices as well. You knew what you were getting into, and you went. Talk about what you encountered.

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Mary Robinson

Well, when I decided not to seek a second term, I asked the Irish government to put me forward because the office of High Commissioner had suddenly become available. It was a new office. The first high commissioner found the job intolerable and went back to be foreign minister of this country, Uruguay. So, they were looking for a new high commissioner, and the Irish government put me forward.

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Mary Robinson

I didn't actually know how difficult it would be. It was a small, underfunded office with huge responsibility, for human rights globally, from gender equality, rights of indigenous peoples, rights of people with disabilities. No funding, no anything. And I was, appointed by Kofi Annan in September 1997. My term would have finished on the 3rd of December, so I left early to do this.

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Mary Robinson

That was a mistake, which I realized afterwards, a mistake. I should have told Kofi Annan to wait, but I didn't know if he would wait and I didn't have any other option. So I was very keen to do this job, so I allowed myself to be bullied and persuaded and and took the position in September by Christmas.

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Mary Robinson

It had almost broken me. In fact, a brother who came home from New Zealand, a doctor, my eldest brother said: Mary, you are having a mental breakdown. And when I heard him say it, I said: no, I'm not going to. And I threw away the sleeping pills that had affected me because what happened was I was working so hard and I wasn't sleeping, so I took sleeping pills and they compounded the problem and I really was.

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Mary Robinson

Now, the reason I mention that is when I wrote my memoir in 2012 with my daughter, I didn't want to talk about that. I wanted to skip that bit. And she said, mom, I remember you wouldn't even talk to us at times. You were in a different place. And I wrote about it with her help.

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Mary Robinson

And that was the most popular chapter in the book, that Mary Robinson could have health problems. Mental health problems. You know, I was very glad that having thrown away the pills and taken some time to rest took a few more weeks holiday. I went back to the office determined to move forward, and we did. And I was very proud of how the office developed.

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Mary Robinson

But that moment was really important for people too. It taught me, don't be afraid to show your vulnerabilities. You know, they can be as important as anything else.

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Reeta

It's a powerful lesson that we're not superhuman. You know, we're human beings trying to do incredibly important work. And you came back to that office refreshed. Challenges were still there, opposing forces to, you know, human rights were still present, but there must have been champions out there as well. Who you met, who gave you courage and who you gave courage.

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Mary Robinson

Yeah. There were two different kinds of champions. There were government champions, you know, I could look to some European countries, I could look to Canada, I could look to

Australia at times, you know, to help me. And you need that support in the UN politically, but also, I would go to some of the worst places of, you know, breaches of human rights, Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Bogota for people were being killed in such great numbers, to, Chechnya.

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Mary Robinson

And I would come back energized because of the people I met on the ground. The human rights defenders. I learned so much from, you know, I was visiting to listen and then bring their stories back, but they were staying and still continuing the fight. And that's so impressed me and still impresses me.

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Reeta

And you did tremendous work to give them a voice and give them a platform, to give them courage. Now, while you were at the UN, you started to hear more about this conversation around climate. All very scientific. What intrigued you? How did you get drawn in?

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Mary Robinson

Well, the interesting thing is I didn't speak about climate at all during my seven years as president of Ireland. And when I was in the UN, there was another part of the UN dealing with it, and I didn't relate it to my big portfolio. It was afterwards when I formed a small, organization called Realizing my Rights to Work in African countries.

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Mary Robinson

And it was a pun on the word realizing, if you like, that everybody should realize they had human rights and those with power should realize, meaning, implement those rights. So realizing rights was a good title and, I started in 2003 and very shortly after that, 2004, 2005, I kept hearing women saying to me, Is God punishing us?

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Mary Robinson

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, whom I was helping in Liberia and saying, Mary, we had two solid rainy seasons. They don't come anymore when they should. They come at the wrong time. How can I mend my roots? I mean, that was the top down. But for the bottom up it was the school is destroyed, long periods of flooding and then, of drought and then flooding.

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Mary Robinson

How can we produce food? The terrible, you know, impact that was already being felt and most of all by women and because of the gender, divide, the different social roles, they weren't at the table of decision making. And yet they had to keep the communities together. And so I started to talk about climate justice. And then I established a foundation on climate justice.

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Mary Robinson

And I remember my senior advisor saying to me, you know: the word justice, Mary, is probably not such a good idea. Climate justice is a very minority issue for a few very left wing groups, etc. around the world. So listen, I can't talk about it except through the lens of justice. That's how I came to it and working on human rights.

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Mary Robinson

And so we worked on climate justice, and I'm very glad now it has become such a mainstream, especially for young people, young climate activists. And they march for climate justice. And they're absolutely right. There's such injustice. The climate issue affects the poorest countries, poorest communities, small island states and indigenous peoples much earlier, much more severely and they're not responsible.

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Mary Robinson

Another layer of injustice, which is, a developmental one, which I think is really important, the advanced economies, we built our economies on fossil fuel. We should be grateful to the workers in fossil fuel oil and gas and coal and in this country, turf peat. We need just transition, which we are practicing here in Ireland, I'm glad to say.

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Mary Robinson

In the Midlands for the bogs. There's no longer a, you know, a board na mona, an official body developing the bogs, etc. but it's now being changed to, getting different types of industry and nature based solutions into the Midlands. And that should happen all over the world. Just transition out of fossil fuel as quickly as possible.

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Mary Robinson

But it's actually not happening at the moment. And the fifth injustice is the injustice to nature, the loss of biodiversity, the extinction of species that's going on. It's really, really worrying, the fragility of the ecosystems. I've learned this because I admired the work of Johan Rockstrom, the scientist who developed what he calls the nine planetary boundaries which hold the world together, if I could put it that way.

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Mary Robinson

And he explained that we're actually in we've breached six of those nine boundaries. But the good news is we recovered one of them, the ozone layer. You remember, in the 1980s, we were all worried we might fry because the ozone layer was opening up and we learned that it was certain chemicals. And we dealt with those chemicals with the Montreal Protocol and subsequent protocols.

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Mary Robinson

And the ozone layer is back where it should be. But we've breached others, climate being one of them. And the acidification of the oceans and so on. The world is a pearl. And yet politicians are very short-term.

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Reeta

They are very short-term. Mary, I want to go back. I want to come right back to these boundaries in a moment. When you got into this whole area of climate justice, what you found were technocrats, people who were speaking about the science, but they weren't necessarily speaking about human stories. And part of the drive for justice was to humanize the impact of climate change.

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Reeta

How did you go about that?

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Mary Robinson

Well, when I realized at my first conference on climate, at my first COP was in Copenhagen in 2009, very male, very technical, very scientific, and nothing about people I couldn't believe it. Nothing about gender. So the following year in Mexico, in Cancun, we formed a women's leaders group on climate and gender and women's group, which was ministers, women ministers of environment of energy, and sometimes the foreign affairs heads of U.N. agencies, who are women.

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Mary Robinson

And my foundation was the secretariat of it, and we helped gradually work for the gender action plan, which emerged in which were still, trying to put forward and struggling to keep on the agenda. And, and then, you know, in various ways, I linked with other groups, were working on climate justice, and we got the issues more into the mainstream.

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Mary Robinson

But there's still not that full sense. I wish that I'd seen in COP 29 in Baku, where I was, a sense when we were talking about climate finance that this isn't charity for developing countries. This is trying to have a safe world for everyone, implements the Paris Agreement, an economist told us it would cost 1.3 trillion for developing countries investment in them, and part of it would be public money, and it should be at least 300 billion by, 2030 and 390 billion by 2035.

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Mary Robinson

But most we could scramble with 300 billion by 2035, which is actually very late and very bad. And that made the, you know, the countries of the global South so angry because they're very frustrated at the lack of a sense of justice. And I share that with them. We need to have a development justice to address the fact we have worsened the situation of the poorest while we've been building our wealth.

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Mary Robinson

You know, it doesn't take much to say. Come on. We need to implement the Paris Agreement in accordance with what it costs. And that means major investment now in developing countries.

00:30:49:05 - 00:30:51:01

Reeta

What can young people do?

00:30:51:03 - 00:31:14:00

Mary Robinson

Young people give me great hope, because they're very connected. They're very knowledgeable. I was, you know, bowled over yet again last week being on a panel with Sheila Bastida, who's indigenous from Mexico. She's graduated from the United States. She's going back to Mexico with a terrific youth organization that has youth from all over the world.

00:31:14:02 - 00:31:33:22

Mary Robinson

She's so connected and they are all, you know, and she and I love being on panels together, and she mentors me as much as I mentor her. And it's a really two way process because I don't have big social media platforms. She does. And I understand how much she talks about love apart from anything else. You know, it's really interesting.

00:31:33:24 - 00:31:43:07

Mary Robinson

And being indigenous, you know, she takes all that wisdom but also wants to link us with the advances that are taking place, the innovations.

00:31:43:09 - 00:31:53:16

Reeta

So it comes back to this notion of guardianship, guardianship for the planet. And I'm back to those boundaries, planetary boundaries. You are one of the Guardians.

00:31:53:18 - 00:32:16:11

Mary Robinson

Yes. I joke that I don't actually like wearing hats, but I seem to acquire hats. And my latest hat is I'm a Guardian, one of the 19 guardians of the planetary boundaries. And we're about to have a 20th, this is building on and has provided much more support for the work, the, technical work of Johan Rockstrom and the Potsdam Institute in Germany.

00:32:16:11 - 00:32:43:23

Mary Robinson

His colleagues, looking at the way in which we really should think of the broad nine ecosystems, if you like, that sustain the world. And, to be in breach of six of those is really very serious. What we would like to see is, you know, the world have chief scientific advisers the way during Covid we had chief medical advisors, remember.

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Mary Robinson

Yeah, we did what we were told because we were dead scared. We should be equally scared, but we should know what we can do. And what the Guardians are saying is: The science is scary, especially when you look at this in the way of all the boundaries that were in breach of and where we're actually cracking up. That's like cracking an egg and we're inside, you know, we need to realize we may not have a future for the human species that maybe as bad as that, or certainly the future will get very much worse for everybody living on the planet, and particularly those who are younger and those who are still,

00:33:19:00 - 00:33:37:14

Mary Robinson

not yet born. And it's a huge responsibility of guardianship. And, we know that it's also possible if we move faster into renewable energy. And actually, what I've done now is work with other women leaders on Project Dandelion.

00:33:37:14 - 00:33:39:20

Reeta

Tell us more about Dandelion.

00:33:39:22 - 00:33:49:09

Mary Robinson

You remember I talked about the light on the window and my belief in symbols? Well, I got frustrated that we actually need a sense of urgency. And how do

00:33:49:09 - 00:34:12:18

Mary Robinson

we help politicians to take the difficult decisions? And I realized we're not connected. All of those who are working on the right side of this, and there are millions and millions of us globally. And the opinion polls say people want action on climate. That's what they say. But it's not happening. So, the dandelion I used to think of as a weed.

00:34:12:20 - 00:34:31:02

Mary Robinson

I now think of it as a beautiful flower. It grows on old confidence. It is very resilient. You can't get rid of it if you want to because it will keep coming back. It's got wonderfully deep roots, so it regenerates the soil. You can eat or drink every part of the dandelion so there's no waste. And how do you spread it?

00:34:31:04 - 00:35:02:00

Mary Robinson

You blow, the children blow the seeds. A thousand seeds for every dandelion. So we want to use it for what I call a radical connection, radical communication and radical collaboration between the indigenous who have the wisdom and are saving the forests. Young climate activists and others. Business that's on the right side. Philanthropy, farmers, fishers, artists, filmmakers, storytellers, so that we know our strength and that we move more quickly because we switch the money.

00:35:02:02 - 00:35:22:16

Mary Robinson

And that's why the COP in Baku was so important, because we spend the money badly. Do you know, there are estimates of we spend somewhere some figure. One figure is we spend 1.8 and trillion dollars a year on what is harming us, and that is fossil fuel subsidies and bad land management. The International Monetary Fund says, no, it's 7 trillion.

00:35:22:16 - 00:35:53:14

Mary Robinson

If you take in the health costs and the education costs and all the other factors of and the cost of rebuilding after hurricanes or destruction, etcetera, especially in the advanced economies now. So, if we switched that money to incentivize, incentivize, rush, rush, rush to this wonderful world, renewable energy, circular economy, green jobs, much fairer. The developed world will have the lights, the power.

00:35:53:19 - 00:36:00:19

Mary Robinson

And because it would be natural and that sun shines better in developing countries. And we need to get excited about this.

00:36:00:21 - 00:36:03:15

Reeta

And we need to educate the world about this as soon as possible.

00:36:03:15 - 00:36:12:14

Mary Robinson

Yes, absolutely. And that's partly what the guardians of Planetary Boundaries is about, with a whole lot of others. We want everybody to become a guardian of the planetary boundaries.

00:36:12:16 - 00:36:39:19

Reeta

And I want to crossover from being a guardian to being an elder. Yes. So you one of the co-founders of the elders, such an extraordinary group of people, many heads of state, Nelson Mandela, Kofi Annan and others who are working for peace, in the world. What led you to co-found this group and how did you connect with these individuals?

00:36:39:21 - 00:37:03:10

Mary Robinson

Well, I was lucky enough to be invited in 2007 to a planning meeting in South Africa in Richard Branson's Ulusaba estate, which was a very nice place where we would have a group of us who were the original to be the original elders, Archbishop Tutu, his wife Graca, Jimmy Carter, Kofi Annan joined us on that occasion by the screen, but he joined us for the launch.

00:37:03:12 - 00:37:21:01

Mary Robinson

Afterwards, there were a few of us. We were launched on his 89th birthday a few months later, back in South Africa in July. But at that planning meeting, I was skeptical, to be honest.

At the beginning I thought, well, what is? When Madiba, as we called him, Nelson Mandela, came in and sat with us and he said, be humble.

00:37:21:03 - 00:37:41:23

Mary Robinson

When you go to a place people there know far more than you do. Listen, don't, do things if other others are doing them better. Choose, sometimes issues quietly use your quiet wisdom, but also speak out. And in particular be on the side of those on the margins. Be on the side of women, be on the side of youth.

00:37:42:00 - 00:38:06:21

Mary Robinson

And this was to me, you know, a message for life. And I was very, very fond of our first chair, Bishop Tutu. Our second chair, Kofi Annan, had been my boss when I was high commissioner, and when he died, suddenly, and I was with him just before he died. We were working in Zimbabwe to help a fraught election there, and he wasn't feeling well and got pneumonia and died very suddenly.

00:38:06:21 - 00:38:28:15

Mary Robinson

Really. And then I became the chair. I've just handed over the chair after six years to another wonderful, elder, Juan Manuel Santos, who was president of Colombia and got the Nobel Prize for his work. And he has a very strong link with Mandela who told them to make peace with the folk. And, that's what he did, you know.

00:38:28:17 - 00:38:31:12

Reeta

What an extraordinary experience.

00:38:31:14 - 00:38:42:10

Mary Robinson

Yes. It's a great privilege to work with the elders. I remain an active elder. I mean, I haven't stepped, I haven't retired, but in fact, I'm going to be more active because I'm not chair.

00:38:42:12 - 00:38:53:07

Reeta

Well that seems like the causes are broad, incredibly important. And sometimes a lot of that work, I'm sure happens behind the scenes as well to mediate.

00:38:53:08 - 00:38:54:06

Mary Robinson

Very much so. Yeah.

00:38:54:10 - 00:39:07:11

Reeta

Yeah, for peace. This is incredible. Mary you have started centers. You and Nick started a center on law, in the University of Ireland.

00:39:07:13 - 00:39:08:00

Mary Robinson

In Trinity

00:39:08:05 - 00:39:13:15

Reeta

At Trinity. You've established your own foundation for climate justice.

00:39:13:21 - 00:39:16:04

Mary Robinson

But it came to a planned end.

00:39:16:04 - 00:39:27:19

Reeta

Nonetheless you started and you've put forward movements, many movements, actually, in your lifetime, Dandelion being just the latest one. What's next?

00:39:27:21 - 00:39:58:03

Mary Robinson

Well, I think fulfilling a joint commitment between Planetary Boundaries, Project Dandelion, the elders, we are all working very closely together. I mean, that's what's very good about it. These are not in silos they are collaborating to build this movement. A climate justice, broad movement of awareness that connects us all to take the steps to move the money and incentivize us rapidly.

00:39:58:05 - 00:40:25:16

Mary Robinson

I mean, the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States, I'll never use the initials, for Irish reasons. The Inflation Reduction Act did incentivize clean energy and it's gone into red states like Texas, etc.. So even though we've now got a problem of President Trump back in office over the next four years, that's bad news for a lot of the things we're concerned about, not just climate, but human rights.

00:40:25:18 - 00:40:45:16

Mary Robinson

Governance, responsibility of CEOs, ESG and DEI issues. There's great push back and he will accelerate that if he, you know, that's what he intends to do. His intention this time is very worrying. But there are so many people who are on the right side, and we need to grow and know our strength.

00:40:45:18 - 00:40:49:21

Mary Robinson

And happily, the hats that I wear work well together.

00:40:50:00 - 00:40:51:21

Reeta

Yes.

00:40:51:23 - 00:41:14:08

Mary Robinson

And for as long as I have my health, so long as, Nick's okay. I'm more urgent than I've ever been. More committed than I've ever been. Because I know that the next five years are probably the most important five years in human history. In those five years, up to 2030, we have to change radically how we run this world.

00:41:14:10 - 00:41:26:13

Mary Robinson

And politicians have to wake up and understand why we need to do it, in order that we will be net zero by 2040, not 2050. In order to really, have a safe world.

00:41:26:13 - 00:41:28:14

Reeta

And not be fried in that egg.

00:41:28:20 - 00:41:29:11

Mary Robinson

Yes.

00:41:29:13 - 00:41:46:07

Reeta

You know, the role and the message for young people, young, whether they're activists, whether they're students, whether they're early on into their careers and their role of values of and caring for others, caring for the planet, what's your message to them? .

00:41:46:08 - 00:41:57:08

Mary Robinson

I think i borrow a wonderful phrase that Kofi Annan used a lot: You are never too young to lead and you are never too old to learn, so it kind of cuts across.

00:41:57:10 - 00:41:58:09

Reeta

Both general.

00:41:58:11 - 00:42:23:04

Mary Robinson

And, when I say you're never too young to lead, the world is at some real risk now, and it will affect the young people more than anyone. They need to be at the table happily, at the UN level, the summit of the future resulted, as we know, in a pact for the future, which acknowledged much more than I've ever seen in a U.N. document the role of young people to be co-decision makers.

00:42:23:07 - 00:42:44:08

Mary Robinson

Co-deciders at the table take this opportunity. Push yourself and push those around you. You need to hear my voice because this is the world that I'm inheriting. We have to admit, my generation, indeed, the generation after me have to say: we failed to actually do what we should have done. Let's listen to these young people.

00:42:44:08 - 00:42:48:15

Mary Robinson

Let's include them. And let's, get faster to where we need to be,

00:42:48:17 - 00:43:03:21

Reeta

And give them a chance to lead. Absolutely. And give them the chance to lead. Mary. Thank you. It's been an amazing conversation. Thank you so much for your time. And thank you for being here on your 54th wedding anniversary. So grateful.

00:43:03:24 - 00:43:05:17

Mary Robinson

Thank you. Reeta. Keep up your own good work.

00:43:05:19 - 00:43:47:22

Reeta

Thank you. Thank you. President Mary Robinson's life and career exemplify the profound impact that one individual can have on global justice, human rights and climate advocacy. From law student to becoming the first woman President of Ireland. From Professor at Trinity College Dublin to High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations. From advocate on gender equality to being a globally recognized voice on climate justice, Mary Robinson is an outstanding example of transcending boundaries.

00:43:47:24 - 00:44:14:11

Reeta

Thank you for joining us on Transcending Boundaries. I hope this conversation sparked a new idea or inspired you to reflect on your own leadership journey and the values that guide you. If you enjoyed today's episode, please subscribe, leave us a review and share our show with others. Until next time, keep leading with purpose and with courage.