



Gender equality and representation
within and beyond the University
of the Highlands and Islands

*A book in celebration of International Women's Day
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Larissa Kennedy: we're not settling. Because in many ways...we don't have much to lose

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Abstract

The chapter outlines an interview between Ash Morgan and Larissa Kennedy, current National Union of Students (NUS) UK president. The interview focused on women of colour and working class women, who were at the roots of International Women's Day, as well as unions and how both are of benefit to all women.

Keywords: Unions, Larissa Kennedy, NUS, BAME

The interview

For the purposes of this chapter I have shortened the names of the interviewer Ash Morgan to AM, and the interviewee Larissa Kennedy to LK.

AM: The National Union of Students (NUS) is quite an old organisation, not ancient by any means, but 100 years old next year. So many old organisations fall in to that ‘male, stale and pale’ trap. How and why do you think NUS has avoided that?

LK: It’s interesting because NUS is and always has been trying to move at a faster pace than the rest of the population or the world, or the student movement, globally in that sense, has always tried to be moving at a faster pace and so I feel like it was almost inevitable that we would redress that faster than a lot of other institutions because when you’re in a space that’s feet are being held to the fire by the student movement it’s constantly asking for more its constantly demanding ‘why haven’t you been able to get X

community to feel like they can lead here? Why haven't you been able to ensure that that community has a voice here?'

So I think it's the fact that the movement hold NUS' feet to the fire which means that it's constantly going to be ahead of where other institutions are and I think to be honest that's not singular for NUS, it's why student's unions move at the pace they do as well, it's why other NUS equivalents, our sister unions around the world move at the pace they do. is because of the nature of a democratised institution.

AM: I agree that the student movement not only in the UK but around the world moves at that pace but it's just it's still a political organisation and it's jarring to see it against other political groups, if you know what I mean?

LK: Yeah, yeah yeah yeah.

AM: It's head and shoulders above and that's so nice to see. So, how do you think that is of benefit to the students who are members of NUS?

LK: I think it's interesting that you used the word before 'revolutionising NUS' and I think that genuinely is what Black women have done for this organisation but not just in like the very visible leadership roles but also prior to being part of NUS in this way Black women have always been at the helm of the student movement. The way that Black women have consistently been at the helm of the student movement, been pushing for more radical, more progressive, more transformative work has a huge impact on the student movement because we're not just seeing things through one lens we're not allowing the cyclical nature of students always pushing for more than these institutions can give us to quell or dissuade us. It becomes part of what pushes us and I think Black women are always bringing that kind of radical element to the student movement. We're always asking 'okay, but is there more?' We're not settling. Because in many ways when compared to the rest of our peers we don't have much to lose. Our communities have already lost so much and people are so struggling that we aren't looking for the kind of piecemeal things that are going to appease people for this year

because we see our work within the student movement as part of a much broader anti-racist, feminist movement and I think that kind of visionary element is part of it but also but those very direct links to elements outside of our space is also a part of what makes it special and feeds into and pulls into the student movement. So yeah, I think on multiple levels it's a win but I would say that.

AM: Well, I think it is as well. And there are people out there who would say we have moved past the need for these days, like International Woman's Day, they say 'you've gained so much, so why do you still need these days?', what do you think about that?

LK: Do you know what? I think it's so exhausting that we still have to have this conversation. Because a lot of my time is spent looking at liberation of education, what would it mean to re-envision education in a way that it was actually safe and healthy and centred care for the most marginalised communities? And when I think about women in education in particular in the grand scheme of history

women haven't even been part of education spaces. And of course that plays out in a number of ways, we see the disproportionate impact of sexual violence on our campuses and that kind of rages on, you know, for me that particularly hits home with my prior work at Warwick with the group chat scandal. That was a core part of my organising before coming to NUS and I spent about a year and a half of my life dedicated to that particular case and that really has shaped who I am as an organiser, and who I am at NUS as well because doing that work on sexual violence in such a deep but also drawn out way because of what happened is just a complete rejection of even that question because how can you have a situation when women are being described in such demeaning, dehumanising and be like 'oh, well everything's fine, there's no reason to be centring women or having an International Woman's Day'

More broadly than that a lot of the other work I do is liaising with sister unions around the world and of course the fight for gender justice is a global one and the situation of women

around the world in every space, in all spaces, is something that we have to fight for, sometimes when I speak to folks who are the first women president in their country in their respective NUS, I take great inspiration from that but it's also a kind of a harsh reminder of where we are.

There's so many levels to which women's liberation is nowhere near finished. And I think people look at their own interpersonal relationships with women and where those women have got to and make a very surface level judgement about whether or not International Women's Day is needed but the women's liberation movement was never about individuals it was about structural power and how that relates to things on a much broader scale and if we look back at that scale there is still a lot of injustice and we're just not going to see women's liberation within the system that we live in and so when we're fighting for a different system, when we're re-envisioning education, when we're re envisioning our society and the broader world and the broader world that's the route for women's liberation we're talking about.

The point being there's this very reductive understanding of what gender justice looks like that it's never going to win for all women because we still have systems in place where the most marginalised women continue to be exploited for profit, where the most marginalised women continue to be at most risk of destruction when it comes to climate, when it comes to other forms of exploitation all the time, everyday, women are facing exploitation, they're facing injustice, they're facing violence, so for us to sit here and be like "Do we need International Women's Day?", even to ask the question is coming from a huge place of not only privilege but structural power.

AM: What you said reminds me of that whole Margaret Thatcher thing: I got here therefore, other women can get here and they don't need help anymore.

LK: It's so reductive, and the centre of self, the centre of ego, the centre of individualism is one of the biggest traps of neoliberalism because it feigns the idea, even me sitting in this role does not mean that this role is safe or healthy or

conducive to Black women, that's not what that says. It just says people clawed and fought for me to be able to be here and for Zamzam before me and for Shakira before her to be able to be here, but what about a Black trans women; if a Black trans women came to step into this role would this be safe, would it be healthy? How would the student movement receive her? There's so many levels to it. What about a Black disabled woman? Would she have the same access that I do? And if she doesn't that's a problem.

I think that, yes, there's levels, and yes, I'm a Black women but that doesn't mean there hasn't been a lot of things that have enabled my existence within this space; the school that I went to and the way that I talk makes me quite amenable to people, I know how to play conversations and assimilate myself to whiteness when I need to in order to access certain spaces why should I have to do that, why should I have to be doing mental gymnastics all the time to invisibilise my Blackness and my Black womanhood within a space and if there were a Black women who refused to do that would she also be received within the space, would

she also be listened to? I think people see very surface level experiences and they then attach power to that when in fact often it's just a falsified subversion of power momentarily that they're seeing.

AM: So you talked about your education a bit and my next question is actually about your education. So we both went to Girl's Day School Trust Schools, you went to Croydon High School, right?

LK: Yeah!

AM: What is your opinion on that whole atmosphere and how has it shaped you as a women and what is your opinion on single sex primary and secondary education?

LK: So when I mentioned my schooling, and having learnt to assimilate to whiteness and having learnt to speak in a certain way in order to be listened to, I learnt all of that at my school. And it was literally a rearing in how to perform whiteness, how to perform middle-classness, because I'm

from ends. I'm from Thornton Heath which is where Stormzy's from, from where Krept & Konan's from and I got a scholarship to this random school and my parents were like 'okay' and...what can I say about it? The learning of those processes was violent. I don't really talk about it a lot because it was violent.

AM: we don't have to talk about it if you don't want!

LK: Oh no, it's fine, but it's now kind of serving my ability to say certain things in a certain way to get people to listen. No, not that I don't talk about it because I don't want to, it's just that I...

AM: No but you said it was violent; I don't want to press you into talking about it if...

LK: No, I'm all good, I'm all good. But yeah, I think it's interesting that the Girl's Day School Trust and how they have a very particular image around girls empowerment but of course that access comes at a price. And so that's why I'm so passionate about talking about free education. Of

course when I say that rhetoric I'm usually talking about it in reference higher education and that very direct marketisation but also when we think beyond that and about that marketisation of certain skills, certain access to certain information.

We live in a world where some of the most crucial access points to shaping policy, thinking about not only politics itself and the civil service, but journalism and lots of those other things that are shaping the dominant narrative of the world that we live in or the society that we live in, are overwhelmingly represented by private school students. And the impact that that has on our communities and marginalised communities in general, so that's why I'm passionate about free education because it shouldn't be that if you can afford it, you can get access to all of these things and all of these spaces and the knowledge about how to conduct yourself. Why should we have to be doing that? Why should we have to be learning how to assimilate and paying for the luxury of it, for the most part?

It's just it is so messed up to me that, for example me, within my community, I had untold opportunities, which landed me where I am today, versus other people that I went to primary school with, say. Who have not had the same opportunities and have not had the same access. And I guess when I'm fighting for free education, the reason I'm so passionate is those are the people I am fighting for.

AM: So who will you be celebrating this International Women's Day?

LK: I think one of my core points, you know when people say about their compass? I think my compass throughout this has really been Angela Davis. If you ask any one of the team at NUS what my slogan is, what I repeat day after day, is 'radical simply means grasping things at the root', if someone comes to me with a proposal I say 'okay, but is it grasping at the root? Is it empowering people to actually ask 'What is at the core of that problem?' and if not we're not doing it', so that is literally what has driven me throughout this whole time, like the A levels fiasco, and the

classist, racist moderation system, we were also talking about the fact that that fiasco was just automating a system that was always happening, year on year. When we were talking about the exploitation of students in the pandemic and financial hardship, with people having to access foodbanks to survive, when we're talking about securitisation and Black students still being stopped on campuses, in a global pandemic, being put at risk in that way, we're talking about anti-Black police brutality, we're talking about all of it so I keep saying 'okay, but are we grasping at the root? Are we directly using our platform to provide a political education that actually tackles what is at the core of this issue? And if not, we're not doing it and we're not saying it' and the only way that I've been able to do that is through the words of Angela Davis and I come back to them like almost every day, so I'm definitely celebrating Angela Davis.

On a personal note I'm celebrating my Nan, not many people know that I'm a carer for my Nan, so that's what I do, literally most hours that I'm not doing NUS stuff and

she's had her first COVID-19 jab and I'm very, very happy about that so I'm celebrating her and her 90 years of life and also the fact that if it wasn't for her and her bravery in coming to the UK, not much older than I was, and carving out a new life, I wouldn't have been able to do any of the things that I'm doing.

You asked who am I celebrating, there are so many women in this movement who have touched my life and have poured into my activism and my understanding of the world, just so, so many and especially shout out to Zamzam though.

Zamzam has really, and I don't think she knows this but she's really shaped my understanding of climate justice and race in a way that is just so digestible, but also still so radical but yeah, big shout out to Zamzam and obviously the legacy that she left at NUS has made it so much easier for me to step into everything I'm doing and the way that I'm doing it.

And yeah honestly the list could go on forever. The gist of it is that this movement is full of women and Black women

specifically that have grown me, like grown me, and I just am honestly grateful for that.

AM: you said about your Nan, how do you think celebrating the women within our personal circles helps the growth of us as people as well?

LK: I think sometimes around this kind of thing of ‘who are you looking up to, who are you celebrating?’ there is the tendency to go for the Angela Davis’ of the world but I think A) that’s important but B) let’s be careful that it doesn’t promote the hyper celebration of the idol, because I think that is so rooted in the idea of celebrity and the idea of this really problematic positioning of activist influences and how do we move away from understanding feminism or understanding radicalism, or whatever as this individual that is so far away and actually positing that within community and within the local picture and actually making that something tangible people can actually access and feel able to relate to. And I think that’s exciting because organising is all about community, it’s all about people

locally recognising their power to transform society through collectivism. And when you're looking more locally I think you're embodying that because you're positing the opportunity to change something or transform something or inspire someone who often has a lot of money and resource I think both are important but I think it's important to do the local recognition.

AM: I have one more question and then we can chat about anything else you want to mention. So I have been given 30 minutes to open up the day and I was going to talk about this interview but they'll read all about it in the e book anyway, so I have decided to talk about a topic close to my heart, because I am trans, and that's making sure we include trans and gender non-conforming women in our International Women's Day celebrations. Especially gender non-conforming women, I think a lot of people say, 'oh they don't need this day because they're not the hyper feminine type of people who are impacted by this political movement. What do you think about that?

LK: I think, again, this is something that is so exhausting because it's a complete misinterpretation of this day and I remember back when I was organising with Warwick Anti Sexism Society, which is where I got my little feminist roots, I remember talking about the origins of International Women's Day, which was originally International Working Women's Day, and really was about a kind of radical approach to internationalism and broadening the idea of womanhood and really being transformative in that and now it's become this very sanitised, monetised, commodified. It's very much about the cis, white woman, talking about being a 'Boss Babe' and just how did we get here? How did we get here? And you see it all the time, capitalism pulls the teeth from radical movements, it moves the people who built the movement from the centre to the margins, and then reproduces it and repackages it as something that they find more digestible, that they find more profitable and it's exhausting.

But I want any woman, any person who identifies with womanhood in anyway, who feels that they're being

excluded from this day to remember that this day belonged to them long before it belonged to the cis-het white woman.

It's the same thing that has happened with the 4C hair movement, it happens all the time, the people that built the movement, the people that are fighting for radical change get literally picked up, moved out, pack your bags, off you go, thanks for that!

This movement belongs to anyone who identifies with womanhood in anyway, big or small. Do International Women's Day in a way that is authentic to you. It doesn't have to be this performative 'tag 10 women', just do it in a way that serves you, and don't feel any pressure to do it otherwise.

AM: And just before I let you get on what do you want to say on this International Women's Day (2021)?

LK: I guess I want to say people have gone to a lot of effort to make gender equality, make International Women's Day, make all of these things very reductive, very individualist,

very commercial, and I think the student movement has always reinserted the teeth of movements and reminded people why we are doing what we're doing, reminding people of the vision we have for the world and the path that we need to take to get there. Reminding people that collectivism is the only way that we win.

So I think this International Women's Day, please first of all, remember that rest is an act of political warfare, so do that, but once you've done that, keep building those local communities, keep building up the women and femmes around you who don't think that they can make change, who don't believe in their power and remind them that as part of a collective they really, really, really can transform, in our case, the education system, but more broadly also the world. And never let yourself, nor the women and femmes around you that power.

And hold that power, we're so often told we should invisibilise ourselves, and particularly as Black women we're navigating this line between hyper visibility, invisibility

and erasure and that is a difficult thing to reconcile, but it's only through each other and our relationships with each other and building our collective power that we can do away with that and all the other ways that people try to erase our power.

At the heart of it it's about collectivism, it's about feminism as a really, really beautiful root to collectivism that centres care, that centres healing and yeah, big up yourselves to everyone, that's the Jamaican in me jumping out.

I also think it's a really interesting time that at the helm of NUS the folks nationally representing, because obviously you've got our nations officers but the national officer team for the first time is all women and femmes of colour. For the first ever time. And it is such a beautiful team to work in. We have fortnightly meetings with just the four of us and sometimes we'll get to that space and be like 'guys, you'll never believe the misogynoir, the nonsense' and I guess my other message is to have that space, have the space

where you can just be like ‘what is this Earth?! Who put us here and why, because we are suffering’.

I think it’s really beautiful to have that space and to build networks of support you know are going to catch you because it really is an honour to work alongside their friendship and their kindness, as well as their very intentional and powerful work.

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Author bio

Ash Morgan is a former art student turned political activist, who works for the University of the Highlands and Islands Students’ Association (HISA). HISA have a special passion for all things equity and diversity and love seeing all people included in all areas of life.