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HOST: LIVING ROOMS is our new digital series looking at the transformation in where and how we live. Read, listen, and watch at thewalrus.ca/livingrooms.

Canadians sometimes congratulate themselves on being “better” in comparison to other countries... More democratic, less violent, more open to new ideas... but...when topics like racism, violence against women, and sexual abuse get brought up, the room - and the Zoom, goes silent.

People lean towards believing that those are problems for other people - other cultures, not here. In her talk, Julie S. LaLonde brings these issues home and all the work we still have left to do.

Welcome to The Conversation Piece.

This is Julie S. Lalonde, women’s rights advocate and public educator.

JULIE S. LALONDE: Good evening, my name is Julie S. Lalonde, and like a really good lapsed Catholic, I want to start with a confession. If you invite me to your party, I'm gonna make it weird. That's just like a thing. I don't do it on purpose. It's not intentional, but this is usually what happens. So, someone invites me somewhere where there's some level of chitchat and networking and chatting and folks talk about what they do for a living. “I'm a dentist, I'm an accountant.” And then folks turn to me and I say, “Oh yeah, I worked in male violence against women,” and there's a pause. And then people suddenly need to get a drink. They're feeling, “Oh, it's warm in here. We're got to go outside, get some air or something.” And I'm like, “Oh, it was really, really nice to meet you, also, your Halloween costume is really racist, but it was super nice to meet you!”

“Thank you so much for coming!”

Yeah, I am that person at your party. And the reason why I'm the person at your party is because folks don't like to talk about the reality of violence against women. And I connect with colleagues from around the world and they will tell you, I am the buzzkill at my parties also. So, it's a universal reality, but there is a Canadian dynamic to that conversation, which is when people hear that I do work on violence against women, they ask me, Oh, where? Because they assume I'm doing that work internationally. Because as Canadians, we believe that violence against women happens elsewhere. We believe that, you know, those people are in their culture and it's such a shame. Here's the money go donate, right? That's what makes us feel comfortable. So, when I tell you, and I tell people at parties that I worked in male violence against women, in a Canadian context, I am blowing up an expectation that people have. Because on the surface, gender equality is a core value that people really love and hold on to quite tight.

And I think we've seen this in Canada since Ivankos dad got elected and we're feeling very smug about gender equality in Canada. So, when you're a woman, a lady who's also a feminist, then people think you're just taking it too far. In Canada, we have a like we have a cool sock wearing like feminist identified prime minister – so like, we good. You can just pack it in. We're like totally fine. And me not wanting to pack it in means I'm taking it too far. I'm obviously a



super ungrateful, first of all, like you could live elsewhere, but you live here. You should be grateful. And therefore, the next conclusion is I just hate men. I hate men and I'm super bitter and cynical about it. And that's why I'm just grinding against a gear that doesn't need to be grinded against anymore. Cause "we good" in Canada.

For the record, I don't hate men, but I really wish they would stop sending me hate mail. That's like all I asked, I was like, all I ask was like, bare minimum. Thank you. That's a lot to ask people just so you know, I'm still working on that.

So when I'm told to be grateful that I live in Canada, I have to be the person that reminds folks that currently in 2017, one in three women in this country will experience sexual violence in their lifetime. And every six days in Canada, a woman is murdered by a current or former partner. I'm not going to sit around and feel grateful about that. We have a lot of work left to do. And because people think my job is to be a buzzkill, which I joke about because in many cases it is, people are like I said, I'm like womp womp.

Like that's, I'm that person I will show up and I will be that person. And that's fine. But really honestly, my job is to call out bullshit. That's what I do. I'm an expert bullshit caller because in Canada we have learned that being explicitly sexist is not a very good, polite thing to do. Right? So, saying, for example, "women are just asking to be raped" – *faux pas*. However, saying, "it's just common sense that women shouldn't drink around men." Sorry. Common sense. That's how we say it. To say curfews and chaperones are mandatory for women. No one would politely say that in Canada, but if there's a predator on the loose, it's common sense that women should stay indoors, not go outside late at night and to travel in pairs. It is rude in Canada to say that women shouldn't take public transit. However, when we say (when women talk their experiences of transit and harassment that happens), we're told there's creepers on the bus. That's what the bus is,

Right? So, we've all heard it.

Well, that is why I am framed as the person who's constantly disrupting what makes people feel comfortable. I don't purposely go out of my way to make people uncomfortable. I actually like having conversations with people, where they're nice to me. And we talk about things that are nice and pleasant, but I can't deny the reality standing in front of me. And it's my job to challenge the subtext and what we hear. Challenging the idea that it is common sense that women don't, shouldn't be safe when drinking around men is not only offensive to women, but it also means you have a very low opinion of men. And I'm going to reframe that and throw that back at you and see how that makes you feel when you frame it in that way. So, it's an interesting to me that I'm constantly told to be grateful. And then I'm also framed as cranky, kind of bitter, little bit cynical. Um, and so in many ways I am, but what folks need to understand is that fundamentally, if you dedicate your life to ending violence against women, if you are a feminist, and let's be honest, if you're a woman, who's a feminist. Because we love male feminists. Like we love them like so much like, Oh my God, the most amount.

Um, there's a reason, why there's a joke, which is the feminist man walked into a bar. Why? Because it was set so low. Like that's how we live.

That's how we live. I'm just saying it needs to be safe. So, when you're a lady who cares about women's issues, people assume that you're the person finding the negativity and everything. But in fact, feminism is inherently hopeful. By working to end violence against women. I am inherently optimistic, but a better world is possible that not all men are predators and waiting.



That women do have strength and resilience to do great things in the world. I think the world can change you don't but I'm the disruptor. I'm the cranky one. And we have to flip that around and look at that for what it is. Cause I haven't been doing this work for very long and I haven't made a lot of friends. I'll be honest with you. People see me come into meetings and they're just like, "Oh, damnit." And I'm like, yes, I am here to be that. And like the Hermione of feminism, I'm just gonna throw my hand up. Like every time, just like challenging what you're saying, just doing it, doing it.

But I haven't been doing this work for very long and my being the Hermione of feminism has worked. So, I fought Carlton University to get a sexual assault centre. And Carlton University has a sexual assault centre. I challenged, thank you. I challenged the fact that we didn't have nurses that were performing rape kits. We didn't have enough nurses performing rape kits at Ottawa. And we do now. I fought for many years, our public transit authority to say, "why do we treat it as obvious that creepers are allowed on the bus? And I'm not." I pay the same fair either I pay less or you get rid of the creepers. That's just what's up. Right? I'm not as just me with one person doing my little piece. And so I'm constantly coming back to this idea of what if there was a little Hermione Granger, feminist in every space.

If we all took the time to reframe and throw back at people, these common sense, notions of gratitude and gender equality and all these things look at how much we could accomplish a lot. And so for me, the secret to doing this work is hope and courage and tenacity. I'm not going to write like, be tenacious because it's long and it's hard, but being hopeful and reframing the fact that you are constantly seen as the person bringing everybody down. But in fact, you're the only person in that room that thinks that a better world is possible. Because I think that men can do better. I know they can cause I've seen it happen. And I think, and know that young girls have the right to live in this country as free as the men. So, for me, I want to ask you if you're okay to disrupt spaces in which you are told to shut up about it because it's awkward.

Like it's, it is awkward. I get that. That's my life. Right. But I'm fine. You'll be fine too. Right. And recognising the yes being disruptive is not fun. It's not easy. It doesn't pay well or at all, your inbox will be the stuff of nightmares. But if we are in every single space, you're not going to be the only person saying those things. You're setting a new norm in those spaces. And so I'm asking you to join me. Let's like ruin some dinner parties. Let's like ruin people's Halloween costumes. Let's just like, do it. Let's just lean into it because I'm telling you if we all do this work that won't be seen as disruptive anymore, we'll be creating the new norm. Thank you.

HOST: Julie S. Lalonde spoke at The Walrus Talks Disruption in 2017, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked, wheeled, and web-cammed into the virtual stage at The Walrus Talks.

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The Conversation Piece Podcast: **Julie S. Lalonde** from The Walrus Talks



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