

## Champions for Social Good Podcast

### Women's Rights and the SDGs, A Conversation with Françoise Girard, President of the International Women's Health Coalition

**Jamie:** Hello and welcome to the Champions for Social Good Podcast. The podcast for people dedicated to social impact. I'm Jamie Serino at the Corporate and Foundations Solutions Division of Blackbaud. I'm here today with Françoise Girard, President of the International Women's Health Coalition, or IWHC. Welcome, Françoise.

**Françoise:** It's nice to meet you, Jamie, and to be here with you.

**Jamie:** Yeah, yeah. It's great having you. So can you start off telling us a little bit about yourself and your background and about the IWHC?

**Françoise:** Well, I'm a feminist activist and I've been working on women's health and rights for almost 20 years now at the global level. I'm a lawyer by training, so I like advocacy and pushing for policy change; that's been my work for the last 20 years.

**Jamie:** That's great. And how did you cross paths with the IWHC?

**Françoise:** Oh, years ago when I was a young activist in New York and I was working at the Open Society Foundations, I was introduced to the coalition by my boss at the time because I wanted to get closer to the front lines, to work on women's rights, and I was in the big foundation giving away money and you're at arm's length and it's... You're not close to the action, and I thought, "You know, I really wanna get a work on women's rights with women from all over the world and be really dealing with the issues first hand." That's how I was introduced to the coalition and I was hired soon there after to do advocacy at the United Nations.

**Jamie:** That's great.

**Françoise:** Yeah.

**Jamie:** Can you tell us a little bit more about the work that IWHC does?

**Françoise:** We work to advance women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. So that's the range of issues from contraception, to maternity care, to safe abortion, to HIV prevention, sexuality education; anything that has to do with women's reproduction and sexuality.

**Jamie:** Can you talk a little bit about maybe the break out of your work here in the US compared to your work throughout the world?

**Françoise:** Yeah. Our work is focused on the developing world, so we work with feminist groups from Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East. We support them financially and also with technical assistance. And together, all of us, all these feminist groups, including the coalition, we work at the

United Nations to try to influence global norms on these issues. There's both the activities at national level by the feminist groups themselves, and then what we do altogether at the global level.

**Jamie:** Okay, great. And so, I saw a fantastic video about the United Nation, SDGs, and your work, it's just a fantastic video, and I would encourage anyone to go to the website to check that out. But can you talk a little bit about the journey and what your team did to help promote women's rights in that process.

**Francoise:** Yeah. The Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs, were adopted by 193 countries, assembled at the United Nations in September 2015. And that was the combination of three and a half years of negotiation, diplomatic negotiations with all governments really discussing together. And the importance of this was, because this is basically a 15 year agenda that all governments have agreed to, to basically save our planet. Because we know we need to deal with that to ensure social justice on the range of issues, from education, to health, to water and sanitation, and economic justice, so really dealing with employment and economic growth, a fair economic development. It sounds very ambitious, but it succeeded something that existed before, which were called the Millennium Development Goals, which had been adopted in 2000 by again, all governments, but which only apply to developing countries. And we realized that that wasn't gonna cut it. If we're gonna deal with the issues the world is facing, we need all governments in all countries on board, including rich countries, and that's certainly clear when it comes to climate change, for example. And so, all governments agreed to start a process of negotiation to develop a common agenda. We, the women's groups, all these groups that we work with, thought, "You know, we need to have women's rights at the core of this agenda. 'Cause we're not gonna address poverty, hunger, ill health, lack of education, if we don't address the rights of women and girls." So we organized, through a platform called the Women's Major Group, about 600 organizations, women's groups from all over the world working on all range of issues, from human rights, to education, to health, to peace and security. And we mobilized, we developed a common platform and then we lobbied governments intensively for three years to make sure that women's rights was gonna be in the Sustainable Development Goals. And the bottom line is that, we succeeded and we have a goal on gender equality, specifically with lots of targets on violence against women, on access to land, on reproductive rights, all these underneath that. And as well, we made sure that under other goals, 'cause there's 17 goals in total, there would be also targets that would address issues specific to women. For example, under the goal on water and sanitation, we wanted to make sure that the concerns of women were addressed there. Because women in the developing world are still the ones fetching water, carrying water, suffering from the lack of adequate sanitation, etcetera. If you look at all the 17 goals, you see that gender concerns, women's issues are addressed throughout. And that, of course, would never have happened if women's groups haven't mobilized. In our experience, if we're not there pushing them, these governments always have other priorities, "Ah, we'll talk about military, disarmament," or what. Anything else but women's rights. So when we're there they do it, but we have to make them do it.

**Jamie:** Yeah, that's what really struck me about the video. The video was really well done and I think it did show that. And so, could you talk a little bit more about, just seem so incredible to get 600 groups together, could you take a little bit more about what that was like and then directing them all toward this goal?

**Francoise:** Yeah. A lot of them are really highly respected in their field of work, for example, there's a whole cluster of groups that work on ensuring women's role in peace negotiations, there's a whole agenda on peace and security and women. And because we've been active at the United Nations for 30 plus years, we know all these different constituencies. And when we reached out to them earlier

on in 2012 along with others, it wasn't that difficult to get them in the room to talk about this. What was hard was agreeing under one single platform, the women's rights platform because, of course, everyone has interest, some of them are environmentalists, and they wanted to talk about the oceans and... So everyone has their issue, and what we wanted to do is really develop a vision for women's rights and the sustainable development goals that was really intersectional as we... That we really dealt with the issues in a very coordinated integrated way. It wasn't just one thing silos side by side but really we looked at all of these together and how these things interact. It took a lot of work and we had in particular, when last weekend where we brought a subset of the groups to negotiate the common platform. We did this near New York in Tarrytown, and the Tarrytown weekend was quite challenging. I have to say, we almost... At some point the whole thing almost fell apart. [chuckle] And then, you know what, we brought it back together and we came up with the three page manifesto which was incredibly helpful because we'd come and see governments, and they say, "What do you women want? You're always asking for this and that!" [laughter] This is what we want and we have one set of demands, and you will get no other document from women's organizations, this is what we want but we want all of this. And we were very ambitious and we got a lot more than I think most people expected.

**Jamie:** That's fantastic.

**Francoise:** Yep.

**Jamie:** I think some people use the term 'accelerators' when they talk about the STGs, and certainly, women's rights I think falls into that and we're just talking about how it's an issue that's interconnected and a part of many of the other goals. Can you talk a little bit about that, about it as an accelerator, as being something where, if we can push this forward, it ends up lifting other issues up with it?

**Francoise:** Yeah. I think it's become pretty clear to a lot of economists, and observers, and people at the World Bank, and this has been true for a while that, if we raise the status of women, other things start to happen with it. There was this research search that was released last year by a big consultancy firm that said that, if we just give women equal pay for their work in the United States, we would raise the US economy by \$4.3 trillion over 10 years, right?

**Jamie:** Yeah.

**Francoise:** That's just in the US, and that's just the wage gap, right? Women's rights is that, as you said, that accelerator, if you deal with that, all kinds of other things start to happen, the economy grows. If you deal with women's rights, then suddenly, you will get your girls in school, they have to stay in school, they'll be educated, then they can contribute to the economy that to supporting their families, etcetera. It's an underlying factor of poverty in a lot of places, the fact that women don't have human rights and are not valued. And conversely, if you can deal with it, it unleashes all kinds of other things. And we at the coalition work specifically on sexual and reproductive rights. And what we see is that, the underlying lack of control of their bodies, that women experience in a lot of places is actually a cause of much other, like lack of education, etcetera. And so, once you give women the right to control their body, their fertility, their reproduction, they're able to stay in school, have meaningful employment, feed their children, and educate them properly, etcetera, and that again, unleashes other things in society. That's why we care so much about reproductive rights because it's actually foundational to women's equality. And with that, other benefits will come.

**Jamie:** Right. As you push for that, what are the primary hurdles and the challenges that you see?

**Francoise:** Well, the whole notion that women and girls should have basic rights is still not agreed by everyone out there. If you think about it, 14 million girls are married off as children every year, still today, so that's a huge challenge, the notion that girls should be able to define their life plans and have access to the same resources as boys is still not agreed. That's our fundamental challenge is that, to change the mindsets about the value of women and of girls. And if we can, at the very foundational level persuade governments and other leaders in society that women should be able to control their bodies and fertility, as for a start, and not be subject to violence, that is, we think, the most fundamental challenge that we're facing right now.

**Jamie:** Right. And so, you work with local groups then?

**Francoise:** Yes.

**Jamie:** So that probably helps with any sort of cultural issues.

**Francoise:** Mm-hmm. That's right.

**Jamie:** So it's just not some American group coming in. So can you talk a little bit more about connecting with those local groups and the importance of helping them frame this out and provide resources for them and stuff like that?

**Francoise:** Yeah. You're completely right. It makes no sense for us as women living in the United States, who've grown up in the global North to go to a village in Nigeria and tell the local elders, you have to respect your girls. This is actually probably counter productive. For its entire existence, the coalition has really strongly believed in the need to empower local women's organizations to do that work at their level, in the community level. And we don't have a cookie cutter approach, it's not like we have one thing we do, like micro credit or digging wells, and so on. Although, those things could be helpful, what we do is really find a leaders in the communities where we wanna work, and then, we tell them, ask them to tell us what they feel is needed in their community.

**Jamie:** Right.

**Francoise:** So they define the agenda, they identify the priorities and the entry points, in each community in different cultures it will change. And then, we help them by providing them funding so they can actually do this work. And then, other resources, often they need materials, or they wanna go to a training, or we'll bring them to the United Nations for those negotiations which gives them a training, practical experience in how you influence policy making and how you approach your decision makers, etcetera. How you frame your proposals and so on, these skills they can take back home and use at the village level, or in their national congress. So that's how we engage with them; it's very tailor made. We give away about \$2 million a year to these groups, so we're a pretty significant donor when it comes to funding local groups on sexual and reproductive health and rights advocacy. But it is very tailored, so we're really... We don't have the answers. Together with them, we will develop the answers.

**Jamie:** Okay. Yeah. So since you don't have a cookie cutter approach, what are some of the things that you found have worked, tactics or initiatives?

**Francoise:** Yeah. For example, I was speaking about the issue of child marriage, which is very culturally rooted, as you noted.

**Jamie:** Right. Right.

**Francoise:** So we work for examples with groups in the north of Cameroon in Central Africa. This is the area of Cameroon where Boko Haram is being active, it's very conservative, very difficult place to work. There are fantastic women's groups there, operating at the community level, who we met years ago through in our travels, in our encounters with women's organizations. And they told us, what we need to do is really engage conversations with local chiefs and local leaders, and provide also a safe haven for girls who are trying to escape these marriages. 'Cause quite often the girls try to run away or successfully run away but where do they go? So you need to have an organization that is prepared to receive them, and then engaging conversations with their families to say, she really doesn't wanna go and get married to this 50 years old man. [chuckle] She's 14 years old, she should stay in school. And they're very respected women in their community and they're able to, in some cases, allow the girls to continue schooling by having her place with some other woman in the village where she is safe there, and then engage with the traditional leaders. And over time, some of these women have become so respected that they've become traditional chiefs themselves.

**Jamie:** Wow.

**Francoise:** By the communities, we come to respect them, their knowledge and they start to see the girls who stay in school do better because some of them trained to become nurses or teachers whenever the families start to change their mind. Those are some of the approaches that we've helped support. And then, the groups have asked us for additional information. "We really need to talk to the girls, for example, about reproduction, we don't have any good materials in French, what do you have?" So we'll be able to source things for them and bring it to them when the next time we go. And then, we look at the materials together and then help them design some conversations or lesson plans 'cause we have expertise on those kinds of things. We don't have expertise in Cameroon or the North of Cameroon, per se, but we know about how you would talk to young people about reproductive health; that's how it works.

**Jamie:** That's great. What kinds of things do you see around access to information because if, let's say, a village does not have good access to news or information, may not know a lot about what's going on in the rest of the world, but then, another village that maybe does can see, this really isn't normal, or this isn't really like the rest of the world does it, are you seeing a lot of disparity there, or are you seeing any improvement? Or what can you comment about regarding that?

**Francoise:** Yeah. Well, the world's getting connected rapidly. And it's pretty amazing you'll be in a remote place in Northern Nigeria, and when we show up, everyone pulls up their cellphone to take photos of us, [laughter] and take photos with us. So you just go, "Wow." And everyone's connected, everyone's got a cell phone, can text message, pretty much. Almost everywhere we go, it's unbelievable. Now interestingly, when that happens, typically, it's the men who have the phones and the young boys. And if you look around, none of the girls or the women have a phone. So there's an issue there. You see who controls the information, who has access to the outside world, who's the mediator, and it's often the men and boys. So yeah, there's food for thought there. Some of the groups we work with, for example in Nigeria, are using technology to disseminate information. For example, we have a fantastic group in Abuja, the federal capital of Nigeria, and the group is called Education as a Vaccine, EVA. And it's run by young people. And they run this big hotline where

they've had a million calls already and text messages, where young people can call anonymously to ask for information about sex, and reproduction, and love and relationship, and so on. And they've trained a cadre of young people to answer these questions properly, without disseminating prejudices, and enforcing taboos, but actually answer the questions correctly. There's huge demand for this, and young people really turning to this to be able to have an offline conversation. They don't feel they can ask their parents about these issues or they can't ask their teachers. But there's a resource and they find out about it because [chuckle] obviously, the success of the hotline tells young people, "I have a way of finding out who can I call and get this information." And the alternative is the web, where they're gonna look at pornography. It's really important that they get accurate information. That's some of the things that we support.

**Jamie:** That's great. And how about, do you find yourselves getting intertwined in conflict, war, the refugee crisis? And how does that play into your work?

**Francoise:** Yeah. We don't operate primarily in humanitarian settings. Our work is typically in places that are not in conflict 'cause that's a whole other set of issues. But given the way the world is today, a lot of places where we've been working with women's groups, have found themselves embroiled in refugee crisis and conflict, like for example, the Boko Haram situation, or in Turkey and in Lebanon, where we worked with women's groups, the refugee crisis as a result of the war in Syria. For example, in Lebanon, we worked with a great group that provides services including safe abortion services to young women. And they start working in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut because there's so many Syrian refugees that have poured in to Lebanon, more than a million, and a lot of them have ended up in the Palestinian camps, so you have the Palestinians and the Syrians now together in these camps. And there's so much need for information. A lot of young women arrive as refugees with... They don't have access to contraception, they're very isolated because they're not in their country, they're locked up at home, they needed someone to reach out to them, so that's what they started to do. So I would say that, it's almost inevitable that in some shape or form, we end up touching on those issues, even though that's not the primary setting where we operate.

**Jamie:** Right, right. So in getting back to the UN, your ability to influence what happened there, it seemed like there already was a little bit of a foothold, and I think, you and I chatted briefly about this, about some of the history of the major groups, the major women's groups that perhaps paved the way for that. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that.

**Francoise:** Yeah. Well, the women's movement realized, a long time ago, that the United Nations and the global arena could be a useful place to advance women's rights. And the reason for that is that, quite often at country level, there's not a lot of possibility, you have a pretty repressive government, or the civil society organizations don't have a lot of space. So feminist groups figured out, "Well, if we can't make headway at home, let's go to the global level, where we can put the issues that we're facing, like child marriage, or honor crimes, or other issues of violence against women, or lack of inheritance rights for land," in a lot of cases women can't inherit land or property." We wanna put these issues on the agenda. We can't do it at home, let's go there." And that has worked really well. And then, once you have these agreements at global level, you can take them back home. And then, you use them for advocacy with your government and say, "Hey, wait a minute. This was agreed at global level, this is the global consensus. Are we gonna make headway now? Are we gonna move things at home?" So that's the approach. And as early as the 1990s, women start to organize in the women's major group during the Rio conference, the original Rio conference on environmental development, sustainable development, and that took place in 1992 in Rio, and that's when the system of major groups was created. And there are other major groups for indigenous

people, and youth, children and youth, and so on. But the women from an early stage, I think have been the ones that have organized themselves the best and have used the system, the platform that the major group provides to influence negotiations and have a foothold in the room, in the negotiation room, speaking roles, and so on, and we've continued with it. We've seized the opportunity in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Jamie:** Nice. Do you find yourself talking about the Sustainable Development Goals with other people, when you're offering advice if women are reaching out to you like, what can I do to help, or is there anything that I can do? Maybe, they work for a company or they are a part of a foundation or something like that. And do you find yourself referring back to those? And in general, what kind of advice do you give to people that ask you those questions?

**Francoise:** Yeah, the Sustainable Development Goals apply to the United States and all rich countries, so I say to... And none of the countries, including the US have realized, "All that is in there." So, I think it's actually a very instructive agenda for anyone to look at and say, what could we do in our company, for example, on equal pay, which is in the Sustainable Development Goals or what could we do in our community on equal access to education when you have drop out rates that are high, or schools that are not good. In each case, I think, no matter whether you're in the US, or Denmark, or Namibia, or India, you'll find things that you can do and you adopt them to your context. Each country is supposed to take the Sustainable Development Goals and then develop a national plan of action that's tailored to its conditions, But I think, each community can do it. It can have an SDG plan for New York City, or San Francisco, or your company, Blackbaud and say, what is it that we can do institutionally? Yeah, we do discuss that, and we tell people who wanna work with us, think about what kind of plan you can develop for yourself.

**Jamie:** That's great. And although you are working internationally, what kind of impact does American policy have? How has 2017 been for you guys?

[chuckle]

**Francoise:** Well, America is an incredibly important country for good or bad. And the current US Administration, the Trump administration, has been extremely challenging when it comes to women's rights. I don't think it comes as a surprise, if I say this. One of the first actions they took, President Trump took after inauguration, was to restrict funding to groups abroad who work on sexual and reproductive health and rights and provide comprehensive reproductive healthcare. And it's gone from there to, it's only gotten worse. The US has, in this case, been a harmful influence at the global level and at the United Nations. Of course, the US is an incredibly influential player, so when the US wants to pull out of treaties, like the Paris accord on climate change, it's extremely damaging. It does diminish the commitment to multilateral treaties. It allows dictators and other authoritarians to crack down on their own activists. They feel if the US doesn't care about these issues, why should we care? And I was particularly disturbed recently to hear that the state department was gonna remove the words 'Democracy' and 'Human Rights' from its mission statement, so that our own state department is no longer gonna promote democracy and human rights anymore abroad, and that's crushing. When we talk to Egyptian activists, or Turkish activists, or Indian activists who are dealing with their own authoritarian governments, they say, "If the US walks away from those ideals it's just devastating to us."

**Jamie:** Yep, yep. When we talk about this, it brings me back to, well, what is the root of some of the decision making and we did touch upon culture as you go into another country or village, and there

are times when all of the stats that you might present and all of the rational arguments that you might present for why we may need to do these things, come up against tradition or something that could be rooted in possibly another century. And how do you address that where the argument back to you is not quite one of coming from a point of rationality?

**Francoise:** Yeah. It's important to have facts. We always need the facts and the evidence to back up what we we're asking for, but it's not sufficient, so it's necessary but not sufficient. You need pressure on decision makers. You need organizing. You need committed citizens showing up and asking for something and demanding it, and sometimes protesting or putting other pressure on decision makers. In a lot of these places, they still wanna get re-elected. We have something that we can hold over them, and so we use those approaches. Sometimes, you have to march, sometimes you have to sit outside their office until they'll meet with you, whatever it takes, right? Or you'll write articles in the press or you'll go on TV and make the points, so that they feel that they can't get away with it. Of course, that implies there's some democratic space in those places, but in most countries there is some space. The feminist activists are pretty good at figuring out how to use it. 'Cause decision makers may not see the light but they will feel the heat.

**Jamie:** Yep, yep.

**Francoise:** And so, we apply some heat.

**Jamie:** Yeah, that's great.

[chuckle]

**Jamie:** But when I speak with you, there are a lot of challenges and hurdles, but I do get a general sense of optimism from you and progress, and so... [chuckle] You're shaking your head.

**Francoise:** Well, you can't work in human rights and you can't work in women's rights if you're a pessimist. [chuckle] You have to be an optimist. You have to keep thinking it's possible even in the face of terrible obstacles. So we're not naive but yeah, we're optimistic.

**Jamie:** Right. And so then, with that, what do you see over the next three to five years? What would you say?

**Francoise:** Well, given the state of the United States right now, the way things are with the administration, and given the fact that there's several major countries that are really undergoing repressive rollback around the world, I think it's probably not possible to advance too much. Although, we're gonna always seek to advance women's rights and seek to make progress. Certainly, we're really organized to resist rollbacks. If they're gonna try to take away what we fought for in the last 25 years on access to contraception, safe abortion, and so on, they're going to meet resistance. And they are, right? So that is the one thing we really care about, mobilizing the resistance, and it's possible to prevent rollbacks. During the Bush administration, which we went through, there was attempts by the Bush administration to rollback agreements on reproductive rights at the United Nations for eight years straight, and they didn't succeed. We couldn't advance but they didn't succeed in rolling it back. We have the line, it was really really hard but we did, so we know we can stand our ground, and we will. But still, I'm hope... There are still maybe some issues we can move forward using other approaches, like for example, I think child marriage, even in very conservative environments, there's a growing sense of that's no longer acceptable. If only because the ministers of

finance have figured out that that's keeping their country back economically, so if we can't use women's rights arguments maybe we can use economic growth arguments to persuade them with the ultimate goal to raise the status of women. We'll use any tool in our toolbox to continue the fight.

**Jamie:** That's great. So Françoise, is there anything else you'd like to add?

**Francoise:** Well, I would just say to all of your listeners, sometimes people ask me what can I do, you're working in Africa, Latin American, what can I do? And it's difficult from somewhere in the US to engage with these issues. Of course, you can follow the International Women's Health Coalition and see what we're doing, and maybe support us, but you can also take action at your local level. I would say, there's something you can do to advance women's rights in your community. Look around you, take action at local level, it's incredibly important, and together we can make the difference.

**Jamie:** That's great. Great advice, very inspirational. I wanna thank you so much for joining us today, it's a great conversation.

**Francoise:** Thank you Jamie. It's been a pleasure.

**Jamie:** Great. So for our listeners, I hope you enjoyed this episode of Champions for Social Good. To learn more about the International Women's Health Coalition, please visit [iwhc.org](http://iwhc.org) and follow them on Twitter @IntlWomen. We can follow Françoise on Twitter @FrancoiseGirard. And you can subscribe to this podcast so you don't miss an episode. You can keep up with the conversation between episodes by following us on Twitter @blackbaud. Thank you for listening.