

Curious Now with Jonathan Van Ness & Sonya Passi

JVN: Hello, you gorgeous people: welcome to Curious Now. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every other week I sit down with a brilliant expert to go beyond the headlines. Today, we're speaking with Sonya Passi, who is the founder and CEO of FreeFrom, which is an organization that helps transform society's response to gender-based violence. Now, if you're a Getting Curious queen, you will remember Sonya Passi and today we are catching up with her and her work that she's doing at FreeFrom. Now, just a heads up: in this conversation we talk a lot about intimate partner violence. If that's something you'd rather not listen to, no worries, we'll catch you next time. However, if you're up for it, this is an incredibly insightful conversation; the ways that intimate partner violence are covered in the media um in journalism in our day to day lives, in movies and entertainment really in everything. We don't label intimate partner violence the way that sometimes we need to, we don't exactly know how to identify it and we really don't fully understand the ways that it affects our society. So, if you want to learn more about this, if you're up for it: this conversation is for you. Now, since we unpacked so much with this topic, we're going to forego our news stories for today because honestly, we were trying to edit this down. It's really was so important. So we'll include some news stories that we're watching in social. We'll go back to our previous format for Curious Now, next time. Let's toss the mic to Sonya Passi to talk all about the state of intimate partner violence in the US. Love you guys to pieces. I'll see you next time on Getting Curious. Um but enjoy this convo, I hope you're doing well. I hope you're staying safe out there. I love you so much. Thanks for supporting us and let's get over to Sonya.

First of all, Sonya, your waves are waving today. Your hair looks freaking amazing. I typically am a little more journalistic on this pod, but I am a hairdresser first and just your hair just looks amazing. So I just had to say it. Um but we last recorded an episode of Getting Curious together in 2021. But for those who may need a refresher: can you remind us of what intimate partner violence is?

SONYA PASSI: Intimate partner violence is power and control over the person that you are in a relationship with. It can look like physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological, economic; oftentimes it takes more than one of those forms and one in three women, one in two trans folks in the U.S. will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime.

JVN: Can you tell us about your work at FreeFrom and what FreeFrom is?

SONYA PASSI: So everything that FreeFrom does is one: to transform the way that our society is addressing intimate partner violence; to address it as a systemic economic problem. To build an ecosystem of support around this issue in which every single pillar of our society and every individual plays their part. Because when you're talking about systemic problems, there has to be full societal accountability. And then expanding the continuum of support for survivors so that there is support long before a moment of acute crisis and there's support long after. We know for most people, it takes years, decades, most likely generations to heal and break the cycle of intimate partner violence. So our strategies to address the problem have to match what the problem actually looks like.

JVN: Internet partner violence: it's in the news a lot right now...um if you're looking for it and you like read the news. Um but what are some of the headlines and what are they missing?

SONYA PASSI: I love that you said if you're looking for it because so often I'll read a headline and it says: "Murder suicide: you know, man kills wife, him himself, wife and children, um after wife files for divorce." That's intimate partner violence. And I almost never see it named as such in headlines like that. You know, we see mass shootings on a monthly, sometimes weekly basis. More than half of all mass shootings in this country, the person killed their partner in the shooting. What if we actually called mass shootings that were partner related, what if we called it intimate partner violence? We would suddenly, as a society, pay so much more attention to this issue. And we have this like misconception in our society that when someone harms or abuses their spouse or their partner in the home that they are, they are a private actor; this is a private issue. But the reality is: under patriarchy, when you are abusive to a partner, you are not acting as a private individual. You are acting as a state actor who has the full backing of a society that says this behavior is okay and there will be no consequences. And that narrative is completely missing from all of our media coverage of this issue. We treat it as a private issue. We treat it as if we are reporting on people's personal lives when actually we are reporting on the state and health of our society.

JVN: That is so true. That is intimate partner violence!

SONYA PASSI: I read a report recently by a PHD student called Zainab Hans. She found that the more money women made relative to their male partners, the less physical violence towards them occurred, and less child sexual abuse in the home. And she ran the same statistical analysis to see if like: if women have jobs, does physical violence and child sexual abuse go down? And the answer was no. It's very specifically about women making closer to what their male partners make having a direct correlation with physical violence and child sexual abuse. And so often, we think about intimate partner violence here and child abuse here and again: just like intimate partner violence and sexual assault, those two cannot be disconnected. Just like people who sexually harass in the workplace are not going home and being safe and loving partners. All of the violence is linked: people who are violent are violent. And again, people who are violent are are are doing so with the backing of our society. I was thinking about this: I was on a plane yesterday and I saw the person in front of me watching this like really violent action movie and I was like, we live in a society that tells men and masc folks that to succeed to be validated, to be um um celebrated, they must be as aggressive as possible. Our culture celebrates aggression. Our business culture celebrates aggression, all of it, our sports. And then when people behave, when men behave aggressively, we we, you know, we're shocked that that behavior existed. And so it, it's really like what we need to do as a society is to stop talking about this like isolated incidents, individual examples. None of this is individual: this is, this is our culture.

JVN: So we know that legislation often shapes survivors experiences. I actually wrote down as we were talking earlier, just like abortion. Since we've talked last Roe V Wade was overturned. One of the very first things that I thought about when that happened was survivors of domestic abuse, people who are experiencing domestic abuse. Um but I

interviewed Melinda Gates this one time in like 2019 and she was saying how like in her work at the Gates Foundation, she was finding that like the number one barrier of upward economic mobility for women is family planning; is like their ability to plan their families. And that was obviously, you know, years before Roe v. Wade was overturned. And then here we hear that the thing that survivors of intimate partner violence need number one is money and now they're—and and also we know that the barrier to upward economic mobility is a lack of family planning. So is there any legislation that FreeFrom is following right now? Um and how has like the overturning of Roe v. Wade like impacted your work?

SONYA PASSI: Yeah, and survivors are definitely disproportionately impacted by the overturning of Roe v. Wade. There's a really famous study, it's called The Turn Away Study, and in it, they found that physical violence from the man involved in the pregnancy decreases for women who receives abortions, but not for women who are denied abortions and give birth. I talked earlier about 50% of sexual assault happening in the context of uh intimate partner violence. So women who are raped and get pregnant and are not able to get an abortion. Very often, that's already within the context of intimate partner violence and not being able to get the abortion causes that intimate partner violence to continue. And in addition to this point that you mentioned earlier, women who are turned away from getting an abortion and go on to give birth, experience an increase in poverty that's four years more than those who received an abortion. So there is a direct link between being denied an abortion and experiencing poverty as a woman.

JVN: And I also learned from Sallie Krawcheck, like back in 2019, she was like the first like female CEO of like a Fortune 500 company—I think it was like Citibank and she does Ellevest, we love Ellevest, she told us all about it, but she, but before that, it was like Citibank or whatever. But she was saying how um the reason that the wealth gap is so fucking wealth gappy is because like so often like women are the ones that gotta like they're with a lot of times, not all the time, but a lot of times it's like they're with the babies more. They're like paying for the fucking diapers because they're like the one like with the goddamn kid a lot of times. And so they just end up getting saddled with more. And even in my mom's case, who was like, not a stay at home mom, she was like, working her ass off. She still had to pay for more shit because we, like, lived with her. So whether you're like a stay at home mom or you're just like, the kids are living with the mom, like, it just ends up happening more often. Like that's why there's like a, that's, it's not only the pay gap, but it's like the wealth gap and it's because kids are a little fucking expensive things like we're...kids are expensive.

SONYA PASSI: Exactly. To answer your question about any litigation that we've got going on and what's going on for us: so we have a, we have a lot of exciting things happening. At a federal level, we have been working with Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez from New York who is working with us on a bill that would, for the very, it would be the first piece of federal legislation to acknowledge economic abuse for survivors. It would create a working group of all of the federal regulatory agencies to understand how economic abuse is happening through our banks and our credit card companies and our other financial institutions and what these institutions can do to address it, which is huge. It comes down to like everybody playing their part. This is us acknowledging that banks have a part to play; federal government has a part to play. So that's a very exciting piece of legislation that we

is going to be introduced at some point this year and would be a landmark piece of legislation and a huge win for survivors. At a state level—okay, this is really exciting—so 2.5 years ago, we created a map and scorecard where we cataloged the laws of every single state and we determined whether they supported survivors' financial security or harmed survivors' financial security. We gave every state a grade and we told each state like this is what you can do better; this is what's right with your law, this is what's wrong, this is what's missing. And since then—it was 2.5 years ago—there have been 500 pieces of legislation introduced at a state level that consider survivors' financial security. And just in 2023, we've had 10 wins. So Idaho now allows survivors to be eligible for unemployment insurance. New Jersey expanded its sick leave policy to include safe leave for survivors for school district employees. North Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont, all established litigation abuse protections for survivors. Tennessee increased their definition of domestic violence to include economic abuse and now has the most robust definition of financial abuse in the nation: Tennessee.

JVN: Tennessee??

SONYA PASSI: Yeah.

JVN: Good for them.

SONYA PASSI: Utah now allows a survivor uh who terminates at lease early to not be held accountable for fees and payments if it's as a result of intimate partner violence. And so we're seeing all of these trends and changes and wins across all 50 states and so much momentum. Um there's 75 additional bills that are, have been introduced this year that may pass. And the, the momentum for state and federal government to address this issue in a way that really meets the needs of survivors, is, is there. So there's a lot of exciting things coming.

JVN: Is there any like outliers on the state level that you've noticed? Like, I mean, I I was kind of surprised by some of the things you said, like go Tennessee, like, is there anyone who you who someone like would maybe assume is like better or like more progressive than they actually are or like...

SONYA PASSI: In terms of outliers, we've actually seen some really interesting work out of New York. Now, New York: progressive, you would expect them to come up with some cool shit, but they've come up with some really cool bills. They have three bills right now that I think are kind of going above and beyond what any other states are doing. So, for example, they've introduced a law AB 1791 that would allow a landlord and an employer to sue a harm-doer for damages related to the abuse. So for example: an employee isn't able to show up for work because of the physical harm against them. Now, the employer has to hire someone part-time to fill their role. This law would allow employers to now sue the person that harmed their employee.

JVN: So if the employee came to the boss was like my partner and then like, if that, if the person, if the employee said to the employer that and then the employer can be like, "I'm suing them."

SONYA PASSI: Yeah! So all of a sudden it puts, it makes the harm-doer accountable to more people. And that's how like community repair happens, right? You're accountable to everyone and you know, the person that you harmed might not have the resources or capacity to get reparations from you. But that employer certainly has like a robust legal system that can get, you know, support them in bringing a civil suit. They also have a, a law that they've been introduced, that's been introduced that would create penalties for people who threaten to expose the immigration status of witnesses and domestic violence survivors in legal proceedings.

JVN: Another quick question I was thinking about with laws: I think, isn't the Supreme Court gonna take up that thing about because like, didn't some guy who got accused of like, or like he got convicted of domestic abuse, he's like suing to try to still be able to get a gun is and then the Supreme Court is going to take up his case?

SONYA PASSI: Yeah, it's bad. It's bad. Like with the Supreme Court makeup as it is right now, this is bad. So it's called *United States v. Rahimi*. Basically the like, what's at stake in this case is: can someone who has an active domestic violence restraining order against them possess a firearm? That's what's at stake. And basically this person, Zackey Rahimi, assaulted his wife in a parking lot; threatened to take her children away. And when he saw a bystander, he fired a shot at them and then told his girlfriend that if she told anyone about the assault, he would shoot her. He was also involved in five other shootings in that year. And he was convicted of possessing a gun while subject to a domestic violence restraining order. And he challenged the law saying that it violated his right to bear arms. You know, with *Roe v. Wade*, there was a 50 year strategy to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. So this firearm law is from 1994. I am sure that there has been a 30 year strategy to get to this point. But we know that two thirds of intimate partner homicides in the US are committed with a gun.

JVN: Alright, we do... No, you're like, you're like such a good person. You're like, "No, I'm gonna stay here to fight." I I did get an intrusive thought about like I was like, should we—we just did an episode about golden passports—like should we just like escape to Dominica yesterday? Like Saint Lucia? Like do we just take everyone and just get out like how much I know you guys did the data for like 740 to keep them safe. How much to get all of us. Maybe we should go to an island. Maybe the shelter thing isn't that off? Is there like a big open, like uninhabited island that like, like um I am, it's kind of like when you're losing really badly in pickleball and you're like, "Oh, I fucking hate losing." Like, I think I hate it here or something. But, but there's good things happening in New, there is some silver linings. New York is a good thing.

SONYA PASSI: Yeah. The only way you can keep doing this work is if you focus on the momentum and you focus on what's good. And we've got to play the long game strategy. Like if folks on the right had given up on overturning *Roe v. Wade*, you know, they stuck at it for 50 years.

JVN: And you know, and we got too comfy.

SONYA PASSI: We need the same, right?

JVN: Yeah. So okay, that's, you're so right.

SONYA PASSI: We need to not give up hope. We need to not be distracted by short term chaos. We've got to play the long game.

JVN: So FreeFrom: are you guys on IG and TT?

SONYA PASSI: We're not on TT, we are on IG

JVN: Uh we're all gonna follow where we can on IG. We're gonna donate to FreeFrom, I loved the shop idea. So we, we got that. Um we, and, and can we stay up to date on intimate partner violence legislation on FreeFrom on the IG or website or do you guys do like a newsletter or anything?

SONYA PASSI: Both: on IG on the website and we have a newsletter. You can find all of that at freefrom.org.

JVN: Okay everyone sign up for that fucking yesterday. This is a really out of the blue question. And I've been really proud of myself for not asking it for the last 15 minutes. I can feel our producer, Chris: don't be drinking anything right now because you'll spit it out. It's, it's an interesting question, but it's... what do you think about the movie *Enough* with JLo from 2003? It's kind of my Roman Empire. I think about it a lot. And her wigs were amazing and she learns martial arts.

SONYA PASSI: Yeah, I mean, I think we need those movies, right? Like we need the cathartic cinematic experience, like *Big Little Lies* and *Bad Sisters*.

JVN: That was good too! Yessss!

SONYA PASSI: We need to work it out because there's really no other outlet for it. And...

JVN: Have you seen *Enough* Sonya?

SONYA PASSI: I have

JVN: And you liked it or you didn't like it? You liked it? I can't tell.

SONYA PASSI: I liked it. You know, it was like my formative years of doing this work were shaped by that, the Tina, Tina and Ike movie was the first thing that broke my innocence.

JVN: Hard to watch. That was hard, harder to watch for me. I mean, and, and I do love Tina. I, I mean, wow, like but I just feel like her sad movie montage lasts for a long time and then it gets, it's...whereas J Lo's is like, really brutal at the beginning of *Enough*. But then really, like that movie had a really good example. I think of like the ways that society does back up abusers like the scene when she comes back to the house and then his mom is like, "Oh, honey, what do you do?" It's like...

SONYA PASSI: Where I'm at now with films like that is: they're almost working against our ability to address this issue because we think of intimate partner violence as really only this one thing which is severe physical violence that usually ends in tragedy. And so all and all of our media coverage of this issue is like that. It's like tragedy, futility, life or death; you go or I go. And uh what that does is it makes us turn away from the issue because no one is turned towards tragedy. No one turns towards futility. And so I'm constantly wrestling with: how do I transform the way our society addresses this issue and get everyone to do their

part if no one is willing to acknowledge that the issue exists in the first place? And one of the things that we're really focused on is helping people to see what could be, what is the vision, what are we working towards? How can you, how can you be inspired by this issue and addressing this issue? So our social enterprise, Gifted by FreeFrom: it's an online store, it's a community of survivors who are entrepreneurs and working to fully operate the store. And this small community in L.A. is thriving and they are thriving because they have living wages and they're in community with other survivors. And so we are wrapping up filming a documentary about Gifted. I am praying and hoping that it will be on Netflix or another streamer this time next year. It's a holiday documentary. It's the countdown to the holidays at the Gifted, you know, store. But I want people to see that and you know, rewire something in their brain that when they think about this issue, they think about joy, they think about community, they think about healing and thriving, because that's something people will move towards. And if you can, if you can, associate, if you can be inspired by this issue, then the natural next question is: what can I do? And that's where I think we need to move our media and storytelling so that we can actually address it instead of it being this kind of dark dirty secret that we don't talk about.

JVN: Yes, I love that so much. And I think, and I was also thinking like who can afford like a personal trainer and an apartment in San Francisco like that like it's not even true like, yeah, like if not ever, it's not, doesn't always look like fucking JLo and not like a like and it, and it is like just so much more of like a human and like all over the place and it's... you guys get on the FreeFrom train yesterday. We talked about how you can do that. We're going to include all the links to that in the episode description of what you're listening to. But in light of, instead of doing our typical media round and this is typical me to go from something that's like quite intense and serious, and then, but we're just etching and sketching this out as we like, move out into the world. I'm gonna need your favorite Olympic memory or like your favorite Olympic sport, winter or summer games. And if you don't watch the Olympics, that's ok, just like, what's your favorite winter or summer sport or your favorite Olympic memory?.

SONYA PASSI: Okay, my favorite sport is the 100 meters because I love speed. And my favorite memory honestly is being eight and stay, getting to stay up until two o'clock in the morning to watch the games.

JVN: Oh, that's so cute! So like a baby Sonya Passi was like staying up till two in the morning watch on like BBC or something. And with your little baby family. Oh my God. How cute. I was wondering where your little baby accent was from... because you live in L.A.?

SONYA PASSI: I do.

JVN: And how long have you lived there?

SONYA PASSI: I've lived here, I've lived in the U.S. for 13 years and I've lived in L.A. for almost 10.

JVN: Do they say that your accent's gotten a little different?

SONYA PASSI: Yes, I have, I completely destroyed, my accent. Is, is, is not American but definitely not British.

JVN: Yeah, I was, I will say I was trying to, like, place it, but that's only... I'm married to like a Brit. So, and I feel like I, you know, I've been married to him for, like almost four years and I do feel like...because it's like people don't want to say the same words, you know, he, he used to be like, "Can I have a portion of chips?" And I'd be like, honey, no one knows what the fuck that means. Like you guys like an order you just gotta say, can I have...

SONYA PASSI: Yeah ! I would say, "Can I have a pain au chocolat, can I have a bottle of water and a pain au chocolat," and I wouldn't get anything. So then I had to change it and say, "Could I have a bottle of water and a chocolate croissant?" And then I would get one.

JVN: Yes. So like you just got to like you like you gotta like...Yeah, so I was like, "Babe, you just gotta be like um I just would like a medium fry." That's what they, that's all they know. Um Sonya Passi, thank you so much for coming on and sharing your work with us on Curious Now I just adore you so much. Y'all, we hope you love this episode. Sonya, we'll have you back. We can't really talk to you again. Thank you so much.

SONYA PASSI: Can't wait, thank you.

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