

The logo for 'JUST 3' features the word 'JUST' in a yellow, sans-serif font, oriented vertically. To its right is a large, bold yellow number '3'. Below the text is a horizontal bar composed of three segments in light blue, medium blue, and dark blue. The entire graphic is set against a dark blue background.

# JUST 3

## JUST THREE Podcast: A Conversation with Musu Bakoto Sawo

December 23, 2020

Host: Catherine LaSota

Total Length: 28:04

[*Music*]

[00:05] **Catherine LaSota:** Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast, a project of the [Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University](#). I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. On the JUST THREE podcast, we talk with artists, activists, and other scholars who are deeply engaged with issues of social justice.

On each episode of our podcast, we have one guest, someone who's connected to one of the many working groups here at the Center. And on each episode, I ask the same three questions: one, how does your work engage with issues of social justice? Two, what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time? And three, how can we foster ethical and progressive social change? I hope you enjoy this episode of the JUST THREE podcast.

[*Music*]

[00:59] **Musu Bakoto Sawo:** It is only right that women take up meaningful roles within these decision-making processes.

[01:06] **Catherine:** On this episode of the JUST THREE podcast, I have the pleasure of speaking with Musu Bakoto Sawo. Musu Bakoto Sawo is the National Coordinator for Think Young Women and the Deputy Executive Secretary of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission of The Gambia. She has gained in-depth knowledge of human rights through more than 17 years of activism in children and women's rights and her membership in different community-based organizations. She has translated this knowledge into capacity building, research, networking, program development, and practical engagement with human rights mechanisms, as well as with grassroots, national, and international organizations and platforms. She holds an LLM in human rights and democratization in Africa. Musu contributed a really powerful personal narrative to the [Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies](#), which was developed by our working group on Menstrual Health and Gender Justice here at the

Center for the Study of Social Difference. Musu's narrative is called, "[Let Girls Be Girls: My Journey Into Forced Womanhood.](#)" And in this narrative, she takes readers through her personal journey as a former child bride, demonstrating the relationship between menarche, or the first menstrual period of a girl, and child marriage. I was really honored to talk with Musu and our conversation took place on December 23, 2020.

Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast. I'm so excited to be here today with Musu Bakoto Sawo. Musu, could you please introduce yourself, say where you are in the world right now, and how you're doing?

[02:58] **Musu:** Hello, my name is Musu Bakoto Sawo. I am currently in The Gambia. I am the National Coordinator for Think Young Women, which is a young women-led organization in The Gambia which was established in 2010. But officially we registered in 2011. And I have been an activist since I was age nine, campaigning for the rights of children in The Gambia, particularly girls. And I have moved on with my life to become a women's rights activists and also identify as feminist. I am a speaker of many issues that affect women and girls in my country. And I am so excited to be here, Catherine.

[03:43] **Catherine:** Thank you so much. I'm so excited to talk with you and to hear your answers to our three questions on the JUST THREE podcast. I know you have a lot of great things to share with us. So I'm going to dive right in with our first question. And the first question on the JUST THREE podcast is: how does your work engage with issues of social justice?

[04:06] **Musu:** My work engages with issues of social justice through capacity building, awareness raising and mentorship. In my country, issues of women's rights are not advanced. Issues of girls rights are not advanced. And it's a range of issues that affect women and girls, from gender-based violence, from issues like child marriage, sexual and reproductive health, and rights issues. They are not prioritized.

So our organization, or my organization, is on a mission of creating a new generation of enlightened young women. And we believe that in order to achieve that, we need to be able to build the capacities of women and girls so that they are informed about their rights. We need to raise awareness so that communities where some of these practices happen are also aware of the rights of women and girls. We also believe in mentorship where we're able to build the capacities of young girls, equip them with life skills that will prepare them for tomorrow—in fact, prepare them from today. We believe that when we build the capacities of women and girls, when we equip them with the right skills, relevant skills, and knowledge, they would be able to advance their own causes, they would be able to speak on their own behalf. And they would not allow other people who are not affected by these issues, particularly men, to continue to make decisions for them, to continue to speak on their behalf, thereby not ensuring that their agenda is advanced. And this is how I and my organization work towards ensuring that all the social justice issues, particularly those affecting women and girls, advance.

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And this is how we engage in it. We travel across the country, to ensure that a woman who is in the remotest parts of this country is able to access, is able to also be of privilege to this information that would help her to advance her own life. We are on a mission of ensuring that a young girl who lives in the remotest part of The Gambia does not lose out on the opportunities given to girls in urban Gambia. We are also equally ensuring that we inform communities that women are not homogeneous, because sometimes in my context, the idea of representation, for example, is a huge issue. And the assumption that all the needs of women are the same has been the reason why we have had also women of privilege, who have for the longest time spoken for marginalized communities—women in those marginalized communities—whose realities are far from what the urban woman lives. And this is the reason why we have been ensuring that we do all of this work, not only in order to ensure that women are informed about their rights, but also to ensure that issues like female genital mutilation, issues like child marriages, issues like other forms of gender-based violence, issues such as access to contraception, access to advocating for there to be a law—the law, rather, that bans abortion to be lifted. So women would have a choice over their body, over their reproductive health, and, of course, over those reproductive rights as well. So this is how we have been engaging, as far as on these social justice issues are concerned.

[07:42] **Catherine:** Wonderful, thank you so much for this important work that you do. And with all of this work that you do, I'm very curious to hear your answer to the second question of the JUST THREE podcast, which is a big one. The question is: what is the biggest social justice challenge of our current time?

[08:02] **Musu:** Gender-based violence—in particular, harmful traditional practices. Female genital mutilation, for example: over 200 million women and girls have been cut, because of a tradition that is very harmful to their health, to their well-being, particularly to their mental health. When it comes to issues like child marriages, where children are forced into marriages, forced into adulthood, and over 700 million girls have been married or are child brides before they were 18 years old. These are problematic social justice issues that I believe have had a negative impact in our societies in The Gambia and across the globe. So for me, these are the most problematic social justice issues of our time, because it continues to happen. A lot has been done to ensure that we end these practices. And these are not just a few practices, but I used my context and how these issues have affected my community. But there are other issues like honor killings in other parts of the world, which are all harmful traditional practices. So for me, these are the main social justice issues of our time.

[09:32] **Catherine:** Thank you, Musu. And I'm curious to ask a question that would also lead into our third question. And my curiosity is: what your thoughts are on what, perhaps, the roots of these social justice challenges of our time are? And perhaps that can lead into our third question, which is: how can we foster ethical and progressive social change?

[09:58] **Musu:** I believe some of the root causes of these social justice issues is patriarchy, for example. The idea that male dominance is the order of the day has been a leading factor to these harmful traditional practices. The idea that women's sexuality should be suppressed is a

leading root cause of this social justice issue that I have identified. The idea that a woman is going to be promiscuous when a part of her sexual organ is not removed, that a woman is not going to ensure that she maintains her virginity. Because in my context, virginity testing is still an important part of certain cultures, if not all the cultures in The Gambia. But this only happens for girls and women, and doesn't happen for men. The idea that a woman's place is in the kitchen, and to take care of the family, or always in positions of welfare is a leading root cause. The idea that these traditions, these norms, have been formulated by people of power. And power in our context is given to men who determine what the social statuses are, who determine these stereotypes and where a woman should fit and what a woman can do and what a woman cannot do.

Misinterpretations from religious scholars. In my context, we have a lot of Muslims in The Gambia, over 95 percent of the population identify as Muslims and, as a result, draw inspirations from their religious leaders. So when we have religious leaders condone these harmful traditional practices by linking them to Islam, then it forces a lot of people to also adopt, and also continue to practice it because for them, their religion is a priority. And they will do anything for that religion, even if it is going to affect the lives of women. The fact that there are religious scholars who promote FGM, who promote child marriages by making reference to the Prophet's wife, and saying that she was married at the age nine, without even contextualizing these issues, and to see its relevance in our current time, and not linking it to proper Quranic text for that matter has been a leading root cause as far as this is concerned.

Gender inequalities in our context, similarly, where women are disempowered, where they are not economically independent and, as a result of that, they are forced to stay in relationships, particularly marriages, where they're abused, either sexually or psychologically, or economically, has also contributed to this. Because if a man wants his children, his daughters, to be mutilated, and even where the woman who has experienced the real consequences of these harmful traditional practices will not have a voice, because she believes that the man is the breadwinner of the family. That if she speaks against this man, that she would not be able to get the income that she gets from the man, that the man controls her wealth, even where she's the one who brings the bread home. And all of these issues, these gender inequalities are some of the root causes of these issues I have identified.

Poverty also is equally a leading issue, or a leading factor, when it comes to harmful traditional practices, particularly child marriages where parents think that their daughters are a burden to them. And when it comes to prioritizing when they have little income, or no income at all, they would prioritize their male children over the girls, because of the fact that there is a belief that the girl would go on to get married and be someone else's wife and as a result is a liability. So there would not be any need for them to invest in the girl. If you invest in their education, it will be a waste of time, because someone else is going to reap the benefits because she will go on and be a member of someone else's family, whereas the boy would bring his wife home and live with the family. So they would rather invest in that.

So all of these issues that I have identified are some of the root causes of these harmful traditional practices. And if we continue to do nothing about it, the status of women will continue to remain the same. Women would remain behind in terms of development of our country. When it comes to access to education—quality education for that matter—women would be left behind.

I look at myself, for example, and my experience of having undergone FGM, having been a former child bride, all of which were motivated by some of these root causes that I have talked about. And having lived firsthand the consequences of FGM, for example, the consequences of child marriages, not being able to deliver my child on my own, because what should have helped me was taken away from me completely. Not being able to enjoy sex, like other women do, because a part of me was taken away from me by people who were not rational about the issue at the time, by people who thought that by removing a sexual organ, the clitoris, the labia minora and majora sometimes, is a way of controlling my sexuality without bearing in mind that, at the time that your aim was to control the sexuality of the girl, that she would grow on to be a woman. And she would get married and would require a lot of sexual pleasure as well as part of her journey in her matrimonial home. Not bearing that in mind, but being very irrational at the time, because all they see at the time is to control the girl's sexuality. And this doesn't apply to boys.

When it comes to issues of chores in the household, the boys are given more opportunities and better opportunities even within the family setup, where the girls will do all the household chores, because she's being prepared for the future, for her husband's house because that would be her role regardless of how educated she may be, or desired to be. Whereas the boy would be allowed to have leisure times to play soccer, to do all those things, to play games. But the girls unfortunately, will not have equal opportunities, where the girls are not given priority in terms of learning about their religion, in terms of learning about the text and interpreting it for themselves. But because of the fact that they're given limited access to education, even in terms of learning about their religion so that they're able to debunk some of these myths that are given based on interpretations made by male scholars, it is a problem. Because when there is no time for girls to access this education, for them to learn about their own religion, we tend to breed more male scholars. It also means that women are not there to be able to interpret these provisions, to be able to learn about their religion, so that they can make their own interpretation of the text rather than relying on men who sometimes use their cultural beliefs, who sometimes use their personal judgment to make such interpretations which are often disempowering of women and girls in my community. So these are some of the root causes.

As far as the ethics are concerned, I think even as advocates, as activists who work in this area, whether it is on gender-based violence generally, particularly sexual gender-based violence, whether it is harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriages, whether it's any of these issues that I have identified, we must be able to put in place specific mechanisms. Because in my context, we have seen instances where advocates or activists speak different languages in terms of them lobbying with communities for them to abandon these harmful traditional practices. Certain communities don't even understand whether it is

Organization A or Organization B. The mode of communication varies. Sometimes the information that is shared with these communities varies sometimes. And when you go to such communities where someone else has been to that community, without bearing in mind some of the implications, because while we campaign to end FGM, our approach—my organization—is the "Do No Harm" approach, which is, how do we ensure that we make social change through social chain communications, where we're able to inform these societies about the harmful effects, or the negative impacts of these harmful traditional practices without making them feel that they are barbaric or they're less of a person. Because we've also identified that having used that route many instances, there has been major backlashes because of the fact that communities were not entertaining activists who go there to talk about these harmful traditional practices, because of the inferiority and superiority complexes that they feel. Because they are of the belief that people go into their communities, insult them, and tell them that their cultures are not good enough. Whereas we take the approach of dialogue. You go to these communities, let them know that these harmful traditional practices have negative impact on the lives of women and girls. That not allowing girls to realize their fullest of potentials, by denying them access to education—quality education for that matter—is a violation of the rights of these people. To explain to them and have dialogue with them, as opposed to going there and telling them, "Your culture is barbaric, your culture is this, your culture is that." That is going to trigger major backlashes. And I feel this is an ethical issue that activists need to bear in mind. Activists need to be able to couch the language in such a way that it doesn't defeat the purpose. Yes, you want to make changes. But how do you make changes? Would it work if you go to these communities and insult them? They would not listen to you. We've had instances where organizations have been driven out of communities, they've been chased out of communities, because of the poor choice of words. So it's basically dialogue for me, for my organization, using the "Do No Harm" approach that will give us the social change that we desire, that will reverse these decisions made by religious traditional leaders and community leaders as far as issues of harmful traditional practices are concerned, as far as issues of access to education for girls are concerned. And this has been our approach.

There is also an issue of duplication of resources in our context, where different organizations compete for attention when the ultimate goal, at the end of the day, is to see that we advance the agenda of women and girls, we see an end to harmful traditional practices, that we would be the generation that will end female genital mutilation, that will end child marriages, that will end childbirth throttles, that would end wife inheritance, which is also a major issue in The Gambia, where—when a woman loses her husband, as a widow, she's sometimes forced to marry into that same family again, to the cousins of the late husband, to the brothers of the late husband. I remember when I lost my husband at about 21 years old, I was asked to remarry within that family, and I refused completely. And I was seen as an outcast, because I chose to reject that proposal, because I didn't want to be in the first marriage initially. But I was forced into it at 14 years old. And I had to endure that. And I had to raise my child, my daughter at the time as a single mother, and I was still going to university. When girls don't have much courage to pursue—sometimes there isn't a lot of endurance because of all the pressures that they get—they tend to drop out of school. I was in third year university studying law when I lost this husband. And I had an 11-month-old baby to take care of myself, and I was asked to marry

within that family. I did not give in to the pressures, but there are other girls, other women, who don't have as many privileges or options that I had. They would be forced into remarrying within that family, failure of which they'll be threatened, that their children would be taken away from them, particularly their male children. These are all problematic issues.

And this is why, as civil society, as persons who work in this area, it is important that we do not duplicate efforts by wasting more resources, but rather synergize our efforts and come together and fight against these issues as a partnership, as a collaboration. Because if we work individually, we are duplicating these efforts.

It's also important that people who are of privilege, people who have the opportunity to be in positions of power, speak against these practices. It is very unethical for one to use his or her power to ensure that a genuine cause is not advanced. It is very unethical for persons who are seen as spiritual leaders to use their platforms to promote an issue that is a fundamental human rights violation of persons who are affected by it. It is very unethical for people of privilege to sit in The National Assembly, for example, and make laws that are against the interests of women or any social group. These are all ethical issues that we must be aware of. These are ethical issues that persons who find themselves in positions of power, in positions of representation, should be able to use their voice if they cannot.

It is only right that women take up meaningful roles within these decision-making processes, that we are equally represented in these decision-making processes so we would be able to speak on our own behalf. So we would be able to advance policies and laws that are in the interests of women and girls, who continue to be the most marginalized in our country, in many parts of the world, that we need to be part of the table. They need to stop patronizing us by speaking on our behalf. And this is what I think needs to happen to ensure that social justice issues are a priority for any country and that injustices against any group of people, particularly women and girls. It's also not something that I want to see my child fight against. I am hoping that it would end with us, and that we will live in a country, in a world, where everyone is seen as equal, not just in theory, but also in practice.

[26:08] **Catherine:** Musu, thank you so much for that. And thank you for sharing your own personal story, which is so powerful, as is the work that you do. It is extremely powerful and inspiring and I heard so much there. I heard these root causes of patriarchy and misuse of religion and poverty. And then you offered some ideas of not just communication, but dialogue with communities—dialogues being so important—and also cooperation among activists. And then finally, also I heard you saying the importance of people in power speaking up for different social groups. And part of that being that it's important for women to take on meaningful roles of leadership as well. Does that all sound right to you?

[26:54] **Musu:** Yes, it does.

[26:55] **Catherine:** It's really been so fantastic to talk with you. And again, such powerful work that you're doing, such a powerful personal story as well. I really am so grateful for you for

sharing this with us today on the JUST THREE podcast and it's been really wonderful to listen to you today. Thank you so much, Musu.

[27:14] **Musu:** Thank you, Catherine, for having me.

[27:22] **Catherine:** Thanks for listening to the JUST THREE podcast. To find out more about our guests, please visit the show notes. To find out more about the Center for the Study of Social Difference, go to <https://www.socialdifference.columbia.edu/>.

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I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. Thank you and catch you next time on the JUST THREE podcast.

