Leaders in SHAPE: Laura Bates

Speaker: Laura Bates
Chair: Professor Conor Gearty FBA

As part of the Leaders in SHAPE series, bestselling writer and founder of the Everyday Sexism Project Laura Bates joins Conor Gearty to discuss her life and career.

This talk is available to watch on YouTube

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Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:01:14]: Hello and welcome to *Leaders in SHAPE*. My name is Conor Gearty, I'm a Vice President at the British Academy and this is a series of conversations with people we think are leaders in social sciences, humanities, arts, politics, and the environment – hence "SHAPE".

It's the idea about thought leaders in our culture and we've had a few of these in the last few months and we're going to have a few more going forward. It's a conversation with me but also through me with you all. So there'll be an opportunity for you to put some questions in – and do please do it – because they get through to me and I pass them onto our guest. Our guest today is somebody who's really made a remarkable difference and had a huge impact – Laura Bates.

I don't just say that platitudinously, Laura Bates began this Everyday Sexism project and it has just opened up a world that people hadn't heard of and that really struck a chord with so many. So it's grown into a number of books and the latest one *Men Who Hate Women* is a powerful, deep discussion of the issues that concern her and we're delighted to have her here.

Now, Laura Bates when I was reading your books – plural because it's more than this one, but this is the recent one. This may surprise you, it surprised me, but I was thinking of Henry Mayhew walking the streets of London saying "there are poor people out there, there's been a great new addition recently". And then I was thinking also of Peter Townsend, a social scientist whom I knew well at LSE.

He was knocking on doors in the 1960s saying "there is poverty you know, you think everybody's rich" – door-to-door sociology. And why I think of it was, you're doing the equivalent on the web. You are looking in arenas, places, recesses that nobody, at least most people, don't even think to enter.

You're finding extraordinary things and you're telling us what's going on in what's called "the manosphere". So I suppose we could start this conversation by asking you to tell me how you became interested in this? How you spotted this gap and what the book is about?

Laura Bates [00:04:05] Well, it's quite extraordinary that it is a gap because these men are not quiet about what they're doing. I think it's both a gap in awareness and a gap in perception. So partly, many people don't know that these communities exist at all but those who do tend to really minimise and dismiss them.

So it's a kind of double problem of perception. What we're talking about are online communities of men who despise women, who believe that women should be reduced entirely to their sexual function, should be dehumanised, objectified, should be forced to have sex with men, should be kept as sexual slaves.

And these are men, extraordinarily, who have acted on these views. They are men who want to be having sex with women and aren't and blame women for that fact because they believe that they are owed sex. These are men who call themselves “incels” or “involuntarily celibate” and they believe that they should rise up in a so-called “day of retribution”, or an incel uprising or rebellion. And repeatedly men have acted on that principle.

Men have gone offline – groomed and radicalised by these extremist spaces – and massacred women. From Elliot Rodger in Santa Barbara who massacred women at a sorority house, trying to kill women who had said that they wouldn't sleep with him to Alec Minassian, the Toronto van attacker, who drove a speeding rental van into as many pedestrians as he could. Eighty per cent of his victims being women who told police when they arrested him that he was an incel, that he'd been radicalised online, referenced Rodger in fact. Yet, you then have police chiefs coming out giving statements in which they say there is no evidence that this has anything to do with terrorism.

And so you have media reports speculating about mental health issues and talking about isolated incidents and “lone wolves”. But actually, these are just two men out of a string who have gone offline and acted in the name of extremist hatred of a specific demographic group, trying to create political change, trying to spread terror through mass violence, men whose actions absolutely tick every box for the international definition of terrorism. And yet, again and again, even though these men – in the last 10 years alone – have murdered or seriously injured over a hundred people [they] simply aren't classified as terrorists.

As a result, the radicalisation and grooming techniques – increasingly sophisticated ones – that they're employing to groom young boys aren't seen as such either. And for me, that was why I felt an urgent need to write the book because I became aware that these things were happening at scale and that their offline influence was much greater than people recognised. Yet, the average person you speak to on the street has simply never heard the word incel and that seemed quite extraordinary to me.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:06:49] There are even these things called “pickup artists” who are having these seminars. I think you went to one. I mean these guys show up now and again in person but mainly it's the world of the net, isn't it? But not hidden away.

Another colleague I had wrote these fantastic sociology books and he wrote about “moral panic”. He's died now, Stanley Cohen – and I'm not saying he would have put this point – but here's a new technology, the web, it does things that nobody's prepared for. There’s always going to be somebody who comes along and says “oh my goodness the world is transformed, we’re doomed”.

Is there a little bit of that as a criticism of you? That you’re getting it out of proportion “come on, I mean nobody’s ever heard of it Laura, so there you are it’s not a big deal”. Do you get much of what you might call a kind of pushback?

Laura Bates [00:07:42] Certainly some, of course, but I think you just have to look at the numbers. The statistics are there quite robustly to evidence the fact that nobody is suggesting that we're talking about all men here. But we are talking about numbering around

the hundreds of thousands. You can very much evidence that based on the number of men who are active participants of these various communities.

Or you mentioned pick-up artistry. Well, pick-up artistry is 100 million global industry where men are paying thousands of dollars in these so-called “boot-camps” in pretty much any major city around the world on any given weekend to be taught how to sexually harass and assault women by men who are leading lights in the so-called industry. Who have themselves often boasted about rape or argued that rape should be decriminalised.

So the statistics are there to back up the fact that we are talking about men going out and massacring women. I don't think that there is a legitimate argument that it's something we should simply brush off and “you're overreacting to be upset about it”. But I also think we're not talking about something newfangled here. We're not talking about the internet causing this problem and it's a newfangled thing. It's actually a centuries-old problem. The misogyny that's being expressed here is as old as the hills.

It's just that social media and online platforms are providing new ways to galvanise it, to connect those who subscribe to these ideologies, to embolden them by association with one another. And unfortunately – and I think most worryingly – to groom and radicalise young men into these ideologies. And that's where it's failing young people if we say “oh don't make a fuss about this” and stick our heads in the sand.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:09:20]: It's interesting, it's around for a long time, the hatred of women and so on absolutely. But possibly, there's a particular circumstance which is the apparent success of what you might call broadly – totally non-judgmental way here – a feminist agenda of pushing ahead levels of equality and allied to cuts in social provision. And you talk about the impact of such cuts. Men's lives are being truncated and so it's a combination of missed opportunity for them and apparent success for women. That drives a sort of dislike which is new – a sort of conservative reaction against progress.

Laura Bates [00:10:04] Yes absolutely, in a similar way that we've seen a backlash against progress in other civil rights movements. And there is often a mistaken, overblown perception of the extent of progress that's been made. It's something that these groups are extremely clever at capitalising on and turning into resentment.

There is this sense of a grieved entitlement amongst men. And it's very easy to turn small feminist wins into apparent attacks on men. But the real tragedy here is that it's all of us losing out. Everything that I'm taking issue with, everything that I'm looking to tackle, whether you're looking at a kind of form of societally-mandated masculinity that is actually suffocating and brutally difficult for men themselves, is actually something that is negatively impacting people of all genders.

This isn’t about men against women but very often there is a kind of media presentation and manipulation of the facts to suggest that. And particularly in these online communities it’s very much weaponised in this way. So progress towards equality is weaponised against women or against people of colour and used to suggest that there needs to be some kind of reactionary protest – knee-jerk defensive response against that.

All of that sends the message that men will be harmed by the advancement of a so-called feminist agenda. But the reality is that if you look at that feminist agenda everything that feminists are fighting for would actually have a massive positive impact on the issues that are affecting men.

If you want to talk about custody, if you want to talk about the idea that women are assumed to be the ones at home looking after the children and men are the ones who are supposed to go out to work and look after their children. These are all deeply rooted gender stereotypes that feminists are trying to battle because they're also at the root of maternity discrimination in the workplace, for example.

Or if you look at something like the male mental health crisis. A huge amount of the evidence available suggests that boys grow up in a world that teaches them "boys don't cry". By the point that you reach university, fewer than a third of those accessing mental health counselling services are male students.

So if we were to actually tackle the gender stereotyping that prevents men from feeling able to reach out for support when they experience mental health problems we would be tackling that male mental health crisis, the fact that the male suicide rate is three times higher than it is for women. All of this comes back to exactly the same outdated gender stereotypes that feminists are fighting against. So really it's a trick to suggest that this is a battle when really we ought to be on the same side.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:12:31] I thought your book read – and I want to get back to this, rather than just clipped for instant reactions – it was very powerfully pro-man because in many sections of it, it was describing how limited versions of masculinity are and how answers lie not just in punishing this man or that man but rather with deep structural change.

Now my concern on your behalf is pompous but is the same thing that happened to Martin Luther King. He's absolutely marvellous on equality but when he says "look the real issue here is poverty" and he tries to work poverty into a major issue. He goes up north and he's sort of no longer got a pull, a claim on public attention. And talking about poverty, neglect of people and public services and opportunity makes you just another one of those "lefties" who want more money to be spent on the state. So paradoxically, your unique selling point relies on you not going too deep.

Laura Bates [00:13:40] Well, I think we have to recognise the complexity of these issues because it isn't possible to tackle them if we don't. It's really important to say that there is an enormous issue with race. That was one of the things that became very clear when I was researching these communities.

I knew that there were strong links between white supremacist communities and neo-Nazi communities and the far-right and the so-called alt-right. But I hadn't realised until I started researching it that actually they're really part of the same community. You can't really even think of these as separate issues. Because these groups are deliberately and specifically seeing the recruitment of men, young men into anti-feminist misogynistic ideologies as a kind of slipway, a recruiting tool, for the far-right and for white nationalism and white supremacy.

So yes, it might be easier to say “let's just pick one top-line, shallow element of this and try to catch people's attention”. But what use is catching people's attention if you're not actually going to be able to follow through and change anything because you don't have a deep enough grasp of the issues involved? It might be good in terms of getting on the front page of a newspaper but it won't necessarily mean that we'll go anywhere. And actually, that's where things have stalled in recent years in terms of attention paid to these issues.

People are quite happy now to talk about violence against women. They're quite happy to talk about #MeToo and about an outpouring of women's righteous grief and anger. But they're not so keen to delve beneath the surface and to look at why that's happening and what the kind of structural root causes of that are. And indeed, how it intersects with poverty and class and racial inequalities. And although it might be tempting to try and present a very simplistic version of all this, ultimately it's not a version that will lead to effective and robust solutions. Because these issues are all interconnected and you can't get away from that.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:15:31] It's both that, isn't it? It's both punishment and efforts to deal with the underlying core because you draw this close comparison with terrorism. You mentioned that a couple of times this afternoon and I was fascinated by that not just because I teach [about] terrorism. I was fascinated with the political power of the label – and it's not labelled – but then you seem to support a kind of prevent agenda which is about “get them early, there's a conveyor belt”. And that's what applies to understandings of political extremism.

But it's often controverted by commentators who say, “there isn't, it's made up”. But your idea is to have this wide circle of people who lend credence to the manosphere and then ever-narrowing circles of people who are more and more extreme. And then at the very centre is the guy who will show up at a sorority with a gun and kill people. Is that more or less it? But that means you have to take on quite tough enemies who are credible political figures who you then accuse of being purveyors of terrorism – let's not run away from the word. Quite a big thing to do.

Laura Bates [00:16:41] Well it's not necessarily about suggesting that every link in that chain is somebody who meets the definition of a terrorist. It is about suggesting that the overton window of politically, publicly acceptable discourses is inevitably widened by men in positions of power. Men like Donald Trump is a good example of this, who doesn't necessarily say things that are as extreme and as unacceptable as the ideology you'll find within these extremist communities but who nonetheless is throwing out dog whistles that these communities perceive as an active endorsement of their ideology.

Crucially, if you're a teenage boy being rolled closer and closer towards the centre of that web that you've just described, then that journey is lubricated by the fact that the president of America said you can “grab women by the pussy”. It's a very scary time to be a young man in America because of #MeToo which is very suggestive of the agenda around false rape allegations for example. Because you think this doesn't sound quite so extreme and ridiculous or unacceptable if you've heard the president saying things like that.

So it's not necessarily about taking all of those circles of the problem and treating them in the same way. It’s about looking at how you can slow down or divert the pathway of teenage

boys or vulnerable young men from the outer circles being rolled in towards the centre. How can you prevent them from reaching that centre? Because everything we know about radicalisation and extremism suggests that it is much easier to prevent that happening in the first place than it is to unpick and de-radicalise after that journey has happened. And that doesn't have to mean shutting down the freedom of speech of those men who might be interlocutors – who say things I object to – but aren't outright terrorists.

It doesn't mean trying to prevent young men from ever going into these spaces online or shutting down their freedom of expression. It means empowering them with the tools themselves to question, to circumvent, to challenge these ideologies when they come across them. And at the moment, we're leaving young men very vulnerable to these bad-faith actors by not giving them those tools.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:18:44] But not the criminal law. For example, the prevent analogy would lead you to the criminalisation of the glorification of terrorism. The prevent analogy would lead you to a range of criminal offences for downloading stuff that is celebratory of this. You could quickly find that the criminal laws are quite a battering ram here. How far down that route perhaps you wouldn't go, you'd rely on social change – we'll discuss that – but how far down that would you be prepared to go?

Laura Bates [00:19:12] Well, I certainly think that I would favour social change. I think this is about the conversation. It's about opening up space for conversation. It's about providing young men with space for socialisation, for exploration, for a sense of community and purpose and pride and brotherhood.

All of which are the seductive elements of these online communities that are currently so effective because of the fact that the real-life offline opportunity for those sentiments has been denied to them. And I'm sorry but it does come back to the closure of youth centres and funding for offline spaces for teenagers and young men. But that also has to happen alongside political support. So there is space for legislation here. Whether it's around recognising these particular forms of terrorism – when they meet that threshold – as forms of terrorism for getting them on counter-extremist watchlists and so on.

For social media platforms to be held accountable where they are providing a space for incitement to violence and hatred which at the moment very much is happening with impunity. But that doesn't have to mean a kind of sweeping heavy-handed legislative agenda against people who are vulnerable to and victims to this kind of rhetoric online. For me, it's much more about empowering them with the tools to question it themselves. It's about education rather than punishment.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:20:31] Domestic Abuse Bill, are you a big fan of that? Does it deal with some of this? There's something going through parliament at the moment do you know at all of it?

Laura Bates [00:20:36] The Domestic Abuse Bill which is going through parliament at the moment has a lot of positives to it. Creating the position of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner

for example for the first time, recognising the importance of coercive control as a form of domestic abuse.

There are also gaps, for example, the failure to protect migrant women who are survivors of domestic abuse who have no recourse to public funds. It isn't a bill that works for all women in our community, unfortunately, and so it really fails on that front. But there isn't, at the moment, an awareness of the issue of this particular form of radicalisation and grooming and extremism. It really isn't on the radar whether you're looking at something like that bill or whether you're looking at teachers in schools and whether they're supported to try and help young people to look out for.

Whether you're looking at parents and what their awareness is or whether you're talking to counter-terror organisations whose job it is to try and act against some of these issues. When I rang some of them up on the phone during the research for the book and used the word incel it went very quiet at the other end of the line and they asked me if I could spell it and repeat what I've said.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:21:39] Which organisation for the liberation of? Where is that?

Laura Bates [00:21:42] It really isn't on the agenda for many of the organisations I spoke to.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:21:45] I can see that and you make a powerful case for them but schools, the education you know. We're getting a bunch of questions from the people watching – “Do we need an educational campaign for boys in schools and community settings?” I asked that against the background of this remarkable new story which – I must say – you predicted years ago about the level of casual, misogynistic, manosphere behaviour there is in schools. So schools present a particular challenge.

In your book, you write an upbeat story about how a school has managed to change its culture. But how deep a problem is it, changing culture in schools? And are there particular schools more dangerous – in inverted commas – than others in this regard?

Laura Bates [00:22:36] It's a huge issue and one that we are just starting to recognise and talk about now. But it is really the tip of the iceberg. It is very much something that exists across all schools in my experience. It isn't something confined to private schools by any stretch of the imagination.

It is something that is really all-pervasive, and it is something that we have known about for close to a decade now. We've known for over five years that there is one rape per day of the school term on average being reported to UK police that is happening inside a UK school.

The reporting rate for rape in the general population is 15 per cent and by the time you get to university level, it's 10 per cent. So you can kind of extrapolate from there – we really are talking about the tip of the iceberg. We've known for close to a decade now that a third of teenage girls say they experience so-called unwanted sexual touching at school – in other

words, sexual assault under UK law. The government has been aware of these issues for years.

The Women and Equalities Select Committee back in 2017 did a huge and comprehensive report about this including those statistics. An enormous, massive testimony from the specialist women's sector about the issues girls were facing in schools. So we have known for some time that this was an issue and it is something that hasn't been acted on. It is something that we can tackle but it requires a robust plan. It requires proper reporting procedures. It requires schools to take a full-school approach. Not to think that they can just have one assembly and tick a box and it's finished.

It's a cultural issue and schools will only tackle it if they have top-down leadership and if they take this on as something that will take a huge amount of work. It can't just be about an RSE curriculum. If you're functioning in a school where a girl is sent home for wearing a short skirt because a boy sexually harassed her, it has to be a holistic approach to the way in which schools deal with sexual violence and with misogyny as a whole. Not just a kind of quick lecture and then assume that the problem is dealt with.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:24:31] So you're a headteacher and say "look Laura, I've got six people coming in directly after you. Their solution to each of the issues they're concerned with is to devote whole school answers to problems holistically, engaging the entire school as a centre of their strategy. Why is your one so special that I should ignore the other seven?" Do you know what I mean? The pressures on headteachers are enormous in terms of managing curriculum.

Laura Bates [00:24:55] The pressure is massive and so it has to be done with adequate resources and funding. There needs to be much better guidance from the government to schools on how to tackle sexual violence, to support schools. Teachers need to be supported and fully resourced to be trained in these issues.

What I would say is that this is universal. This isn't some specific niche subject that's only going to affect a few people. This is universal to children's lives. The ability to form a healthy relationship, to report, to have respect for somebody that they're in an intimate relationship with, to know how to approach a sexual encounter with consent and respect.

These are massive life skills we all agree that children need to be taught about – how to read so that they can go out and use that in their lives. They need to know how to read a map so they can get around or how to count so they can make change in a shop. I would argue that these are equally enormous, fundamental life skills that will impact all of our lives. And if we don't provide them to children we're failing them.

This is a human right and it has been utterly neglected so it is seen as a kind of add-on to the curriculum as if it's something that's kind of niche and an extra subject. But really it is the subject, how we relate to one another in our lives. It will affect every one of us every day for the rest of our lives.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:26:11] There's an unspoken concern, is there? That the big driver, the change, the transformation here is pornography. And nobody really talks about it

and parents don't quite understand what's going on and nobody discusses it out of embarrassment.

But youngsters are – on the data in your book and generally – engaging with these extraordinary versions of human interaction which are sexually based very early on. Is this what you're describing? Your detective work? Is it a creature of the intersection of online opportunity with solidarity and pornography?

Laura Bates [00:26:53] Pornography certainly plays a role and a significant one at that. Although, I don't think we should make the mistake of laying all of these issues at the feet of pornography. But if you think of pornography as the wallpaper of young people's online world then it creates a context in which these extremist ideologies find it much easier to take hold.

Because the mainstream pornography young people are accessing normalises a very lowlevel, everyday misogyny that they almost take for granted as the baseline. And it's easy for people to say "not my child" or "not most kids". But actually, we know that 60 per cent of young people have seen online porn by the age of 14. A quarter first sees it when they're 12 or younger.

So we really are talking about most kids coming across it. And what adults often don't recognise because we are at a unique moment in history that's rarely discussed where a generation of non-digital natives are parenting and educating a generation of digital natives, that creates a massive vacuum, a kind of culture gulf. So when I talk to many parents and teachers about online porn they assume I'm describing a kind of online version of a Playboy centrefold or an FHM pull out.

But what you're actually talking about in the most mainstream easily accessible websites – the kind of thing a curious 13-year-old might find if they typed "sex" into Google and click the top link – are websites showing sex as something violent, degrading, humiliating, done by men to women.

And one in eight of those videos, according to recent research out of Durham University shows sex acts that are actually illegal. So rape, sexual assault, coercive control. The normalisation of that in terms of young people's ideas about what it means to be in a relationship or to have sex is just massive.

It's very normal for me to go into a school and hear kids saying rape is a compliment or "it's not rape if she enjoys it". I was in a school where they'd had a rape case involving a 14-yearold boy and a teacher had asked him "why didn't you stop when she was crying?" And he had said to her "because it's normal for girls to cry during sex," because that's what he'd seen online.

And this comes back to the question of why should schools be talking to kids about this, why should schools be doing this? Because if they don't they leave behind a vacuum. And the vacuum will be filled by all of this stuff from the internet rushing in and creating real problems for all of us further down the line.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:29:13] Camila Cavalcante has written in, she's in the audience here, and asked about "what we can do in terms of law to manage online crimes

so often overlooked and interconnected to an international community?" But added to that, would this be the problem it is if the social media industry was not so overwhelmingly male? There's a new awareness of quite how amazingly male; they design boy stuff for boys. Would it be different if the whole of Silicon Valley was women?

Laura Bates [00:29:53] Yes, of course. If you look at the fact that a lot of this stuff is happening on Facebook and then you realise that Facebook actually started out as a platform for boys at university to rate their female peers on their appearance and sexual attractiveness you can't really not draw a line there.

Ultimately, the algorithms of certain social media platforms are having a massive impact in enabling radicalisation on a mass scale. YouTube is particularly significant here because of the fact that around 86 per cent of teenage boys are on YouTube and that it's where the majority of them get their information from.

We have to understand the sheer power that these companies wield in order to recognise why it's so significant. If you take YouTube, for example, 70 per cent of the videos watched on YouTube are those recommended by the algorithm. You know the little video that pops up and says try watching this next and it automatically begins to play? And 37 per cent of all mobile internet traffic internationally is accounted for by YouTube. So put those two numbers together and you realize that about a quarter of all mobile international internet download traffic is people just watching the videos that a YouTube algorithm, designed by an overwhelmingly white male team, has picked for them.

And suddenly it's less of a surprise that the algorithm is being very effectively gamed by a close-knit YouTube network of far-right, misogynistic, white nationalist influences. It doesn't mean for a second that they set out to make it that way but is it a surprise that it might be vulnerable to abuse in that way? Or that it might be having unintended consequences when the people who created it weren't necessarily representative of the community that they're serving? In just the same way that the people who make up our politics, our legislative communities, those with the power to change things aren't necessarily representative of the diverse communities most likely to be impacted negatively by these particular forms of online abuse.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:31:49] An anonymous questioner has asked whether it's got a lot worse because of COVID and the fact we've dived further into a remote life with fewer opportunities for real-life conversations? So true, given that that's clearly the case. Has it exacerbated things and is it likely to continue? Or is COVID going to be one of those short-term hunkering down that leaves less trace than we fear in terms of people's real-life engagement as opposed to their online private engagements?

Laura Bates [00:32:23] Well, I don't think anybody has the answer to that. But I certainly think that there is a high risk of teenagers who – through no fault of highly-pressured parents – have been left to their own devices on the internet for a year. Those of them who may

have been more likely to have been sucked into certain forms of radicalisation and online extremism won't necessarily be popping out of it because COVID recedes and they're able

to go offline again. I think that once these people get their claws into teenage boys unfortunately it does tend to be a kind of ongoing process.

We do have statistics from a brilliant charity called Glitch to suggest that online abuse of women has increased significantly during the pandemic. So we have hard evidence to suggest that when we all spend more time and increasing amounts of space online we are seeing the abuse of women have a sharp uptick. And the likelihood – given how effectively boys are being groomed in spaces like online gaming and bodybuilding forums – is that a year largely on those platforms rather than in real life will have increased the number of them falling prey to these forms of extremism.

The real worry is that we won't necessarily be able to answer your question just in the next year or two or when a vaccine hopefully takes effect. Because we won't necessarily see the impact of this until many years down the line. If, for example, we're seeing the online spaces in which young people are cutting their teeth in debate learning how to create a political argument, if those online spaces have become so extraordinary hostile that there simply aren't safe spaces for teenage girls, in particular, perhaps teenage girls of colour and so on, then we won't necessarily recognise that loss, that silencing of their freedom of speech until much later down the line when a new generation of men starts to emerge into political life.

And people ask "we thought things were getting better, where are all the women?" So there is a real risk in that it is very difficult to answer questions like the one you just asked because there aren't statistics. Nobody is tracking this stuff. It just isn't on anybody's radar and that makes it very dangerous.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:34:23] One interesting recent development has been the way football has fought back against online abuse. And football, which would be regarded as not exactly the most progressive community. And it's not – as far as I know – misogynistic abuse but it's racist abuse. But the reaction has been to go off social media, stand up to racist players. Something that looks from afar quite impressive. And football has this dramatic leadership role in our culture. Iman has talked about something called The Cybersmile Foundation [and] a footballer called Jordan Henderson.

So, is there the possibility of the mobilisation of sports leaders? We see it more and more in the field of respect for women. Or is that really hard to contemplate? That male footballers inspired by female footballers getting more and more parity of experience and exposure and treatment in the media lead something which just says "it's not cool" – or whatever the latest term is – to engage in this kind of misogynistic behaviour. Is that something you'd put time into? And Iman wanted to know whether you wanted to work with Jordan Henderson. Would you put time into that kind of thing?

Laura Bates [00:35:36] Absolutely, I think for me the answer to this is to attack it from as many angles as we possibly can. And you're right that footballers are enormously culturally influential in our society. You can't get away from the fact that they themselves are in a sector that is marked by enormous sexism. Of course, if you look at the disparity in pay for example between male and female footballers. Or the tiny percentage of advertising money that goes into women's sports versus men's sports and so on. So there is some kind of internal issues there that would have to be worked on as well.

But of course, any man in a prominent public position with a kind of social clout and cultural capital is in a position to start shattering this normalisation. And importantly, is in a position to have an impact on young men who look up to them as role models. Because a lot of this is about forms of masculinity, and what we teach young men it is acceptable and desirable to project and ways in which they are taught to perform their masculinity. And certainly, footballers are role models for that specific element of our society.

So footballers choosing to tackle this stuff, to talk about it, to be unafraid of being vulnerable and emotional. All of those things would have a positive effect absolutely. But it has to come alongside other action as well. There isn't any single sector that can fix this on its own. We have to look at education. We have to look at cultural and social shift. We have to look at social media and online platforms. We have to look at politics and legislation. And when we put all of that together we can see the dial moving.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:37:05] Julia has asked plaintively, revealing that she's a mother of two boys, "how can I raise feminist boys?" your book is [about] everyday sexism *experienced* by women but it's *seen* by men. Creating boys who will get up in the bus and walk across and sit beside the young woman who's being abused by some fool or will express solidarity. Now, your book told me how important that is but also – to my surprise – a bit how rarely it happens. How do we raise feminist boys?

Laura Bates [00:37:43] Well, I think for Julia's boys being raised by a feminist parent is a massive first step and probably she's already on the right track by the very fact that she's asking the question. That it's something that she's aware of. I think it has to be about little and often. It's not about sitting boys down and having one big scary conversation with them. It's about, from a very young age, helping them to become aware of these issues and to recognise and see the inequality in the society around us.

Because if they aren't given those analytical tools to challenge and to question and to recognise in a society in which they might get a baby grow at the age of three months that says "future engineer" while their twin sister gets one that says "I want to be a pretty princess". It's very easy for them to simply absorb this stuff as fact. Or one real baby grow marketed at nought to three-months-aged baby girls that said: "I hate my thighs" which is perhaps the most depressing thing I've ever seen. But if we teach children that they don't have to accept what's shown to them by society as fact and just the way things are inevitable then we give them the tools to shatter the normalisation themselves and to be part of the change rather than telling them off.

It's not about punishing boys or telling them off or trying to make them ashamed for being who they are. It's about giving them the tools to question and to probe. It's about mentioning the little things when you're in the supermarket and you go down the magazine aisle and there's a sign that says "women's magazines" and it's got celebrity and diet and fitness. And then on the other side, it says "men's magazines" and it's got *National Geographic, The New Scientist, The Economist*, political magazines. That sends a message. And if kids just see that they learn "okay so history and politics and science are for boys and diet and celebrity are for girls". But if a parent says "that's weird, isn't it? Should we put one of those

magazines in the other section because your mum's an economist or your dad does all the cooking in our house so that's wrong, isn't it?"

If you point [that] out and if you give them the opportunity to talk to you, to have conversations so that when they reach the age of 14 they can come to you and ask "how do I talk to girls?" Or "I'm worried about this thing I've seen online" instead of typing it into a forum where a nameless, faceless man somewhere else in the world says "don't worry lad, don't you know every girl has a rape fantasy? You'll just be playing into it". Then you'll be giving them the structure to have other avenues to explore and that won't be the only place available to them to go for advice.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:40:03] As you say, what strikes me is that there's a mismatch between where the culture is presenting in the shops and so on and the real lives of people. And that's a cultural god that's preserved by advertising, by television, by selfpromoting versions of beliefs that are shared by many people. So puncturing that is hard work.

Because you're the killjoy constantly saying "don't get that magazine, don't do this, don't do that" but the answer is partly also to approach the shopkeeper, isn't it? And so build connections with the stores. Kimberly Vinton came in early on this – how do you maintain hope and resilience in your work? Because your work, some of the stuff you had to do was not attractive. The diving deep into these things and building connections with people on the various covers. How do you keep the hope up?

Laura Bates [00:41:01] Well, I think you realise how many different ways there are to tackle it and how many people there are who will. It's not just about saying "don't read that magazine". It might be about letting them buy the magazine and talking about it once they've read it. It might be about talking to the shopkeeper. But it also might be about encouraging your teenage daughter to feel like she can walk into a newsroom and apply for a job and change the statistics that right now just one-fifth of front-page newspaper articles are written by women in the first place. And then we're getting the issue further down the line.

So, I continue to be hopeful when I see the ways in which people are finding – in their own daily lives – to disrupt this normalisation and to fight back. And it might be something really small. It doesn't always look like signing a petition or going on a march. It might be the man who wrote that the Everyday Sexism Project entries had opened his eyes for the first time to the reality of sexual harassment and how it feels for women. And when he went out the next day, he saw some builders shouting at two women just ahead of him on the pavement shouting "get your breasts out". And he panicked and everything he'd planned to say eloquently went out of his head but he knew this was his moment to challenge it. So he lifted up his T-shirt and showed them his instead. And it was a very tiny thing but it said to them "you wouldn't do this to me so why are you doing it to them?" And it was one tiny thing that made a difference.

When I read about the teenage girls, who are being told that they can't wear leggings to school because it might distract the boys, who turn up the next day and picket the school with placards that say, "are my trousers lowering your test scores?" Or the women in workplaces who are choosing to stand together to tackle sexual harassment and say enough

is enough. Or [when I] received a message from an 80-year-old woman who said that she had carried the pain of sexual assault for her whole life and that seeing these other stories of other women talking about it have made her realise for the first time that she wasn't to blame and it wasn't her fault and she wasn't alone.

Every one of those things to me represents a chip in the glass of this normalisation that tells us “this is just the way things are. There's nothing you can do. It's always been this way and it always will be”. And I think that it just takes enough tiny chips and enough people knocking and tapping to shatter the glass eventually.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:43:10] Well, we're going to have to wind this up. I can't resist asking you a couple of questions. This is the British Academy, we are professionally committed to academia. Why aren't you a lecturer in this or a reader in that? Why have you not gone into academic life?

Laura Bates [00:43:27] Well, I do visit lots of universities and work with students who are incredibly inspiring and finding their own very inventive ways to challenge this stuff. And there are brilliant feminist academics Dr Fiona Vera-Gray for example she's behind the research from Durham university and Claire McGlynn who I cited earlier. There are so many incredible feminist academics who are tackling this stuff and are working on it.

For me, this is the path that has presented itself to me and it seems to be something that I can do that's useful. I think we all have our own small part to play. The most important thing for me is that I feel that I've been given a responsibility that nearly 200,000 women and girls have shared their stories with me. And if there is anything I can do to use those stories in the most targeted, pragmatic way possible to prevent another generation from going through the same things then that's the small part that I'm really happy to play in trying, as so many of us are, standing alongside each other to change things.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:44:26] And what's next? Is there a new book or a new thought? Or is it – I mean in not a drudgery – more of the same? Building up the support, the solidarity, achieving change?

Laura Bates [00:44:38] Yes and for me it comes back to this idea of trying to find lots of different ways to tackle the problem all at once. I thought back to my teenage years and the fact that I wouldn't necessarily have been reading non-fiction. And if you'd asked me what feminism was I wouldn't have known what to tell you but I was devouring novels. Young people for me is a very important place to start and to try and tackle this stuff. I'm writing a young adult novel that will come out later this year which tackles some of these themes, but obviously through a different format which hopefully will reach a few people who might not necessarily have heard me talking about these things in a more formal setting.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:45:12] Fantastic, you've got these two honours. You've got something called the British Empire Medal but you've also got Cosmo's Ultimate New Feminist. I want you to tell me which you are prouder of?

Laura Bates [00:45:27] Well, I suppose anything that gets people talking about these issues and that reaches a new audience who wouldn't necessarily have been aware of this stuff before. That's incredibly important, isn't it?

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:45:39] So both?

Laura Bates [00:45:42] Neither of them are particularly important because it's not about me and it hasn't been from the beginning. It's not been about me or giving me awards or telling anybody anything about me and who I am. The thing that has absolutely made this effective and made it work which it never would have done if it was me on my own standing on a soapbox is the fact that 200,000 people have shared their voices together. That's what will create change and that's what matters is those voices.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:46:06] Great, we've got another one of these Leaders in SHAPE events coming up quite soon. There will be details on the web. It's with Tristram Hunt the [director of] the V&A, ex-Labour MP, writer. And again, with Tristram we'll be talking about this way you can try and influence culture. So do try and make a date for that. There'll be lots of details on the web and on Twitter in due course.

For now, can I on your behalf – we're remote so we don't see you but we know you're there. Can I on your behalf thank Laura Bates for what was a fascinating 45-minute discussion in our *Leaders in SHAPE*, the British Academy series. Laura thank you very much!

Laura Bates [00:46:44] Thank you for having me.

The Leaders in SHAPE series features the most influential figures shaping the social sciences, humanities and the arts in conversation about their lives and careers.

For future events, visit our website

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