EPISODE 45

[INTRO]

[00:00:05] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world, with Rick Torseth and guests.

[EPISODE]

[00:00:19] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we talk with people around the world who've made a decision to lead, raise their hand, if you will, and to lead on issues that are challenging, highly complex, probably have a lot of social implications for community.

Today is going to be as usual. No exception to that goal. I am really honored to have a woman from the Kunda State in Nigeria, Larai Gwani. She has an incredible background, and I'm not even sure we're going to find out how she's managing to do all the things that she does at one time. She is legislative officer in the government for 18 years. She is highly experienced in government policy, advocacy, sustainability, communications, implementation, and legislation.

Larai, I think you're a one-person government here with all of that. You're an advocate for policies that cater to the needs of women, children, and those with special needs. You're involved with a women's group that we're both familiar with, Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative. If that isn't a full day's work, you also are doing research on gender, social inclusion, health, and with a focus on sickle cell disease. My goodness.

Larai, welcome to the swamp. It's so good to have you here.

[00:01:38] LDG: Thank you, Rick. It's an honor.

[00:01:40] RT: So that's my introduction to you. But I'm sure I forgot some things or don't know some things. So let's begin with you just sharing with people what it is that you think you want

them to know about you before we get into this conversation of leading. So what is it you think is important for the listeners to know about who you are?

[00:01:57] LDG: Hi, everyone. I'm Larai, as Rick said. Well, one thing about me that I would like people to know is the fact that I was raised in a patriarchal society. So having to fight my way to be heard has been something I've done since I was born. I grew up with brothers that I would play with them, but then I was expected to come in and cook and do the dishes. I didn't get it as a child.

Growing up, that proceeded also when I realized that, oh, even when I had parents that tried to balance it, have their kids being included in every aspect in the home, growing up I realized that the world is in such balance because I had a right to go to school. I had a right to all the freebies equally to my brothers. Even if I had to fight my way at home to be heard or to be equal with them, it wasn't so. The world wasn't equal, and it wasn't totally fair to women.

Going to school, it wasn't really such – that wasn't such a bias in the education system. But a bulk of it came when I started work. I didn't understand why people would look at me strangely when I enter a room or when they say, “Oh, she's the community clerk.” I get vibes from people which is a woman, to the extent that I've had a common teacher say he didn't want me to be his secretary. So I asked him, “Is it because I'm a woman?” He said, “No.” It's simply because he's not very good in English, and I'm not very good in Hausa.

But everyone knew that he just didn't want to work with a woman. So having that, I knew that as a woman, I had to fight my way. Sometimes, you can be seen as you're controversial. But sometimes, I tell my peers, “Well, they say good behaved women never really make history, and I want to make history. So call me what you want to call me, but I have to be heard.” So that is it.

One thing about me is people know me as a go-getter, as a fighter. These are the foundations that made me become a fighter because even right to my village, I'm not – I don't have rights to like buy a piece of land in my village with my money and my status. No, they won't sell it to me because I'm a woman. So when it comes to promoting the rights of women, I'm very passionate about it because when I raise these issues, people are shocked. You have money but you can't

buy a piece of land. I'm like, “Yes.” I have to either use a proxy, tell my brother, “Okay, I want to buy a piece of land. You stand in for me.”

What happens tomorrow if he decides to double-cross me? Those are basic issues that women face here. So sometimes, when people hear women mostly in this part of the world are advocating for equal rights, we're not advocating for anything out of the ordinary. All we advocated is our fundamental human rights that we have been deprived you get. So this is me. I'm Larai. I'm a gender advocate. I promote policies that cater for the needs of those in needs. Thank you.

[00:05:05] RT: All right, so there's a lot there. Let's unpack it a little bit. So maybe we start a little bit in the present and then work backwards, I think, because I think that I'm curious about you. You've been in government for 18 years. So there's clearly a place there for you to make change from a government standpoint.

First of all, so given what you just said about who you are and what you're experiencing as a woman, what drew you to government as a place to spend your time and energy and create change?

[00:05:33] LDG: [inaudible 00:05:33] wrote a book, *Accidental Public Servant*. I laugh because I said, “I'm the accidental civil servant.” Actually, it happened. This job stumbled, and I just stumbled and landed on it because that wasn’t my original plan. I was way young when I was done with school, and my mom was recent – just got **[inaudible 00:05:55]** not too long. So she didn't want her baby to get a job in a big city in Lagos, far from home. I was barely 23. So in order for her to keep me at home, they had to get me a job in Kaduna.

Because my parents were both in the civil service, and my father reached the apex of his career in civil service, so he – we kind of knew people around. My mom said, “Hey, my baby is done with school, and I want her to get a job in Kaduna.” So, fine, my – they brought me the civil service forms. I filled it, and I got this job.

At first, I did not like my job because that wasn’t like my dream job. I wanted to be in a big city, in big corporations, sitting on the board. But then something happened. I was given a role that

made me interface with civil society, pressure groups, NGOs. That was I became secretary to the Committee for Women Affairs and Social Development. So then I began to help people come. They come in for advocacy. Because I was the face of the committee, so I liaise between those groups and the committees in the house.

Basically, that was how I got involved in this job. But it was – when it came to making laws concerning children, the Child's Right Act came to the house. It was at a public hearing that I realized, oh, you're doing a good job here. It's a profound thing you're doing because you're part of this group that are going to enact a legislation that will cater for children.

In Nigeria, you find lots of children roaming the streets, begging at really tender age. They could be four, three sometimes. Three, four, you see them on the roads. For me, I kept on wondering. Where are their parents? But I was shocked to hear that the people didn't want the law.

[00:07:50] RT: Really?

[00:07:51] LDG: Yes. The religious bodies, they want the law. The traditional leaders, they want the law because they felt they're going to turn our kids to Western children, and they can't call the police on us. So it went back and forth. For me, that was – it became my baby. Once I enter in meeting and it's child's right, everybody starts laughing once they see me because I started. I told them I started this work barely a young adult, and the bill was passed probably 10 years later.

For me, this job came to me by accident. But because of what I'm able to do and the impact I'm able to put in the work I do, I'm grateful for the honor God gave me to actually be where I am right now.

[00:08:34] RT: So you fall into this job. You don't like it to start with. Now, you find yourself in some conversations that relate to the welfare of other human beings, kids in particular. How did you go about organizing yourself and other people? Because you're not in a position, I wouldn't think, all by yourself to change the law, so you've got to be part of a larger group to create some kind of different reality around the laws and what services can be provided.

So what did you learn about how to work that process to get an outcome that was beneficial for the constituents that you were trying to help, given that you didn't come from a government background to start with? How did you navigate that?

[00:09:16] LDG: I think it's a bit open to learning, networking, and acquiring knowledge. I'm being trained. Of course, I'll give that to my organization. I was trained for the job. But then the networking part of it was skills that I had to pick up along the line and knowing that people are different. So you have to bring in the card of using your emotional intelligence to interact with different people because it's not like science. One plus one is two. No. Now, you're treated with various individuals, and they all have their point of view.

For me, it's working on people's emotions, like their emotional intelligence, to actually get what you want and then your manner of approach. I always to believe that it's the manner at which you ask that you get, when you come like you have a right or you're bossy that you don't get things done. But then I think it's like working in the house actually made me believe that I had this political gift to me to actually navigate through the politicians because someone said, “Oh, you want something done in the House of Assembly, go and meet Larai. I need to hook you up with someone. She's the only one that gets every door open if you want it open.”

[00:10:29] RT: All right. So hold on here now because we got people who are listening who are trying to figure out how to do what you know how to do, and you're calling it a gift, a magic. Let's give some people some ideas about what you actually know about how to do that. You have a process. You have a way of understanding human beings, I suspect, that get you further down the road than the way you described other people do.

So can you share with people some thoughts and ideas? If you had a room full of young women who were trying to navigate this world of leading, and this is a question, how do you help them understand, and what could they do based on your experience?

[00:11:05] LDG: For me, I tell them they should know their job. They should know what it is that they want to advocate for. They should know it on their fingertips so that if any question is thrown at them, they have the right answer. So first thing is knowledge. You must acquire a certain level of knowledge in what you're doing so that you can become a notoriety in it.

Secondly, it's understanding people. There are people that are reserved. So when you get into a room, and there are four people, there's one that is chatty. There is one that is reserved. There's one that is in between them. You need to understand that the one that is chatty is easily approachable. But the one that is a bit reserved, uptight, now you have to have a background check about the person. What is it about this person? What does he love? What interests the person?

But on first meeting, you can't really know those things. But as Africans, people are drawn to morals and if you're polite. You get. So you don't go there as a boss. Let me help you arrange this. Once you do that, in Africa, the people around you start, “Oh, this girl is well-behaved.” Or, “This person is well-behaved.” Then they are drawn to you. Sometimes, when new legislators come to my office, they are shocked at my rank because I come there with a sense of humility. Okay, we are here as a team to promote the state, and we're here as partners. I don't come feeling like, “Oh, you're just new here. You don't know the job.” No. I come there because you're representing their constituencies.

First things first is your manner of approach. You don't enter a room with that air of, “Oh, I'm authority in this, and I'm here.” No. You also give them a listening ear. You can ask them to close subject matter.

[00:12:48] RT: So there is something to the phrase civil servant, meaning you're civilized, you're kind, you're polite in a responsible way, and you are there to serve a greater good. So operating from those perspective of a phrase that everybody uses, but I don't know that they always understand what government people are doing when they're being civil servants. It sounds similar to that.

I'm curious, what is it that you've learned about yourself that surprised you in this work, that revealed parts of you that you didn't know you had that you use on a regular basis? So everybody's clear, this is a chance for you to brag a little bit. Be proud of what you've learned about yourself that surprises you, that you bring to the conversation.

[00:13:29] LDG: My staying power. I didn't believe that I could stay in a place for this long. Actually, I've been here for 20 years. If anyone had told me that I would be I'll be a civil servant, a job that I didn't ever wanted the first place, I wouldn't believe it. I'm still normal. You understand? I'm still my happy self. I wouldn't have believed it. Because I'm a Christian, so I tend to tell people I'm a waiter. I understand. When there's a person like in the Bible that says, “Those who wait upon the Lord,” I said, “No, I'm a waiter.” Now, I know what it means to actually be in a place waiting.

For me, that is like I didn't think I had the ability to be in a place for this long and still be able to make a positive impact without having unnecessary conflicts at work. I'm still amazed at that. I never knew that I could manage situation on people because you're interfacing your colleagues. You're interfacing your superiors. You're interfacing your subordinates and other people from other departments. Always go to work and come back and say, “Oh, it was a good day. I didn't have any conflict with someone.” Then, for me, that's one thing I'll applaud myself for.

[00:14:42] RT: Okay. So 20 years. I'm curious, how do you take care of yourself? How do you sustain the stamina of leading and doing this work on a advocacy basis for people you represent and then do it day after day for 20 years?

[00:14:57] LDG: I think because it’s not like you do just one kind of work. Or it’s not just – so there are different issues that pop up, and most of these issues are interesting issues. It could be bills. It could be going on oversight. It could be an interfacing with civil societies and NGOs. It could be going to ministries, departments, and agencies to check the work they're doing. So it's quite a lot of things at the same time happening. It could be going into the chamber as a clerk at the table, taking down votes and proceedings during planned recessions. It’s not like you're doing one thing at the same time.

But I think, for me, I would say I was lucky to have actually stumbled into research also because also that came accidental. I had – a group of people needed someone from the house to talk to. In talking to them, the principal investigator just asked, “What did you study?” I said sociology. He said, “Oh, wow.” He said, “We needed a secretary to come for the focal, a focus group discussion, where we're doing the research. Do you think you'll be free on Thursday?”

I checked my calendar. I was free. I came down, took down the reports for them. I think what I tell my subordinates is whatever you're doing, make sure you do it with a sense of purpose and honor. You understand? Because while the meeting was going, at the end of the first day, I gave them the report. I think that was what wowed them like, “You're done with the report?” I said, “Yes, it's just a draft. So just vet through it and let me know if there are other things, other changes you want.”

The next day, I went for the second day. I was like, “This thing is interesting.” The PI looked at me and said, “What role do you think your organization can play in this research?” I said, “Well, my organization is law-making body. So we practically make policies in the highest level because making laws is the highest form of policy.” He said, “Oh.” So I read it up, implementation science, how you involve policy makers into research. I read it up, and I became the site lead for that research in my organization.

For the past five years, I've been doing that on part-time basis. You understand. Like we – for me, because I love to work, I don't like being idle, actually, to be honest. I love engaging in my mind. I will tell colleagues, and they tell me. They say the clause in Hausa, king of work. They call me Sarauniyar aiki. That’s like queen of work.

[00:17:37] RT: Queen of work.

[00:17:40] LDG: So I tell them, “No, it's my mind.” I tell them even the Bible tells me the idle mind is a devil's workshop, so I need to keep it busy. I don't like being idle. For me, it's having to like a form of engagement with my mind. I don't like being idle, actually. I kind of love it.

[00:17:59] RT: So let's broaden this a little bit now that people understand what you're up to and how you're affecting the world. My first question is for you, at this point, what does leading mean to you? What does that take? What does that look like? What is leading?

[00:18:12] LDG: Leading for me, it comes from being led. So leading is like a transition. You were led, and you learned under the person who led you. Now, you're leading others. So it's almost like a baton. It's been handed over to you. Now, it's for you to ensure that you hand it

over to someone else because leading for me is it has to do with teamwork. It's a greater good. It's not about you. It's about those you have in your sphere of influence you get.

For me, that's what leading is. Leading is not bossing. Well, I use bullying. It's not having your way all the time. Leading is listening. It's learning from people around you. It could be a subordinate. Leading is accepting another's point of view, doing that. It's what's good. It doesn't have to come from you. So for me, leading is actually following. For me, I see it as if you're leading, then you're following. You're following someone to be able to lead another. If you're not following another, you can't lead another.

[00:19:16] RT: It's a useful distinction. I've been in this work for quite a while, and one of the things I'm constantly reminded of, and you're doing it again right now, is how little emphasis in this whole spectrum of leading we put on followers and following and how to do that well. I think there's consequences in organizations and governments because people aren't availed the opportunities to show what they can do about how to be good followers and move themselves from that position to a place of leading.

I want to go back to how you started this conversation growing up in a patriarchal society. So from your perspective, I know you're involved in different projects. I know you're involved with the Empowering Women Excellent Initiative or EWEI. We know that we have a friend and colleague who's a leader of that, Sophia.

Talk, if you would, about either what you want to do or what you might see as your responsibility to do, I don't know if they're the same, to help other women travel the road that you've been traveling so that there are more women's voices of authority and leading in government and in the private sector, et cetera. So how do you think about that? What's needed? How do you help that happen?

[00:20:23] LDG: Well, I think in my little way because I engage with young women, it could be those that come as youth couples or they are interns in my office. One thing I tell them is ensure you're good at your job. Learn whatever you're doing. Learn mastery of what you're doing. That way, you're a force to reckon with. No one is going to just shove your aside because even if you're a woman, and it's a patriarchal system, you're still needed because of what you have, of

what the organization will benefit having you on the table. So you will not be easily shoved aside.

First thing I tell women, learn mastery of whatever field you find yourself in and show you excel in that field because it's not a level playing ground. You understand? You're already starting from a disadvantaged point, so you have to work 10 times harder. For me, engaging with younger girls and sometimes, I tell them. I give them mentoring tips. If there's a course there because even in universities sometimes, there are courses that they say or they don't want lots of women there. It's supposed to be a male-dominated course.

So I tell them when you find yourself in those kind of courses, it means that even the lecturers are going to be biased because you're a woman. So it means you can't afford to miss a class, to miss a test. You have to be there. If classes start by nine, be their max five minutes to nine. Ensure you're never late because as a woman, you'll be picked on. You're an easy target. So you have to understand the society you find yourself in that this is not a glass ceiling we have. It's a glass – no. It's a metal ceiling.

[00:22:09] RT: It's a metal ceiling. It can't be broken.

[00:22:13] LDG: Yes. So you have to just navigate through the system the way it is. But you have to always have it behind your mind that I am not like them. I'm not like every other person. I'm here in this world. I'm running this race, and I have to get to the end. You understand? So that is it.

Whenever I find myself talking to women or group of women, which I do often because I'm a leader in my church also, so I get an opportunity. I find young people coming up to me, "Well, this is what I want to do," or, "This is the issues I have at work," or, "These are the issues I have in school." I tell them go back and apologize. You can't fight the system. It's a male-dominated system. You don't want to attract this kind of impression on you because the moment you start talking, people will tell you as a troublemaker who does – she's here again.

Sometimes – I used to be like that when I started work, when I was really young. But now, I just navigate through the system, and I know what to do, what to say. There are times that it's not

everything I respond to. You understand? It's not everything I answer to. I just get this. I just smile. I know you can't do it. You can't do away with me, so.

[00:23:25] RT: This is interesting, Larai, because there's a school of thought by women that how you get ahead is you do use your sort of muscle. You do use your voice. You do stand out. You do sort of roil the waters a little bit. What I hear you say is that sometimes, yes, maybe. But oftentimes, there's a different path you have to travel.

So how do you – for listeners who are younger, they're behind us on this journey, and they're listening to you, how do you help them read the situation and make a determination whether they get tough and use their voice? Stand up or find that other route that you're describing here, which includes, as you just said, you need to go back and apologize? Which for a lot of people, that would not be. Apologize for what? I didn't do anything. So help them understand the long game that they're in, and what they're trying to do, and how to calibrate their actions and moves.

This is a very long question. I'm sorry for making you do this. But how do they navigate that? It's a messy kind of weird world that they're trying to traverse, and you've done it. You've been there. So they're looking at you and saying, “How'd she do this?”

[00:24:38] LDG: When I was a child, to apologize wasn't that easy. I always hide my wings. In fact, I told someone. I said, “If I had that fire as a child now, maybe I'll always be organizing one protest or another for women's rights.” You understand? I have that kind of fire. But my dad taught me how to apologize. He said, “Just look at me. Say I'm sorry.” I said it like 10 times. He said, “What happened to you?” I said, “Nothing.” He said, “But you have brought peace to the room.”

[00:25:08] RT: You brought peace to the world. Is that what he said/

[00:25:10] LDG: To the room.

[00:25:11] RT: To the room.

[00:25:12] LDG: Like to the situation. Yes. You brought peace to the situation. You just – it's – you are right but then, okay, fine. End it and end it. Just end the conflicts. Be the bigger person. You could be the one that is right. It doesn't take anything. Say, “I'm sorry.” Or, “I'm sorry for this situation.”

For all the times that I've said, I've apologized, even when I knew I was right, I knew that the person sought me out later. I knew that opportunities came, and that person felt – was almost like a conscious thing, like their conscience. They always wanted me on their side no matter what. So in reality, really, where you want your points to be heard, it's a thin line between advocating and it becoming conflict. You understand? It's very easy for an advocate to be seen as a conflicting person, and that's the line, and that's the transition you need to avoid. So it's you. You know you have that check. You know when you're going overboard. So you need to come back.

When you're facing a situation whereby you feel it's your right, sometimes just look at the situation and say, “I'll be the bigger person here. Oh, I'm sorry for this situation.”

[00:26:22] RT: But here he says you're also trying to manage the temperature in the room, the heat in the room. If it's too hot, you're mindful of that, and we got to lower it. We've got to find a way to calm down, so we can move forward. People can't see us because this is audio. But you're shaking your head. Yes, I want to say this. Not that I'm right, but just paraphrasing what I think I'm hearing you say.

What is that craft of managing heat in the room? As your father said, you brought peace to the room. That took the temperature down a little bit. Again, people are listening and saying, “Okay, how do I actually do that because at two o'clock today after I listen to this conversation with you too, I got to – walking into a room that’s pretty heated. So how do I read the room? How do I figure out what's going on? How do I manage myself and the temperature to the degree I can to make progress? What's your approach to that?

[00:27:11] LDG: It's listening. Don't be in a hurry.

[00:27:13] RT: Don't be in a hurry.

[00:27:14] LDG: Because sometimes, in a conflict situation, before you get your turn for your opinion, it's been sorted. Same with people, if there's a conflict, and you're just paying attention and not saying anything, you put the other person – you make the other person uneasy already by not saying anything.

I find myself like – for instance, when a group came to advocate for gender equality bill, I told them, “You have to do something about the name of the bill. You can't come to a patriarchal system and say you're advocating gender equality because they're going to feel you're trying to compete with them. A woman is trying to compete with a man. You're trying to switch rules, they're going to frustrate it, the effort. So it's better you change this name.”

They thought I didn't know what I was saying. I said, “I work in this system. I know how these men think.” They're not going to see equality, and it's gender. All they're thinking of is a woman wants to take the role of a man. No, we are patriarchal. It was handed to us by our culture, by God. We are ahead. We are the head of the society.

It's difficult for you to let such bills slide when it comes to that kind of situation. So I told them, even the child's right, we have to change the name of the bill. You understand? So it was changed from Child's Rights Act to Child Protection and Welfare. But the content didn't really change but just the heading. That was just the trick.

Sometimes, you need to understand the way the psyche of the people you're dealing with works, and that is – still today, that bill has not been passed, gender equality. They've tried to change the name. They've tried to. But because you've already presented, I told them this was the experience we had with the child's right. Do it this way because it's just a name. Change the name. The content is there. It's a beautiful bill. It doesn't have anything to say with I want to take the role of a man in the society. But just the heading of the bill just ticks the men off in the room.

[00:29:20] RT: So understanding those cultural differences between genders and constructing the description or a narrative that is inclusive, rather than causing separation as a strategy for achieving what you're talking about here. All right, so I like this definition or this thought. Let's

see how you like it, which is to say that from a leadership standpoint, we tend to learn more from our leadership failures than we do our successes.

Everybody on this podcast gets asked this question. So from your experience, what's an example of a leadership failure or two that you experienced, and what did you learn from it that has made you a more effective leader?

[00:30:01] LDG: I think – I worked for **[inaudible 00:30:02]** in UK. On returning, I wanted to step down what I learned. For me, it was quality improvement. I wanted to improve the organization with how things were wrong. For me, I thought it was a good thing. I forwarded it. I wanted to do step-down trainings for my peers. But it didn't happen. It didn't happen because I didn't realize that it's not everyone the lights change. It's not everyone that is open to change. Some people are comfortable with the present arrangement. Not because they know any better but because they feel this arrangement works. So why should we bring something that we've not tried before?

For me, the top-bottom approach I wanted to use is what I learned, and it didn't work. That situation didn't happen. I realized I would have done it in a more subtle way by just in my own work. You understand? Just start enforcing those learning take-homes that I learned in my training, doing things different for them to see that I'm actually more efficient. You understand? And that way. So the other person gets to learn, and the other person gets to emulate that, and the other person gets to emulate that.

Of recent, for me, it happened. I was heading the secretariat of a particular committee. We're working on the remaining bills that the House hadn't passed, and they were trying to pass them before the expiration of this assembly. I found myself. I just – normally, the lead will want to take all the work to get all the shine and all the praise. But I found myself like delegating the other secretaries, "Oh, you handle that draft. You handle that draft. You handle that draft. Let's work as a team."

One thing in the civil service, one thing in my organization is that teamwork. People like being applauded in an individual basis. So mostly, you want to be the star of the department. So people just want to be good at what they do. But now, I found myself delegating roles to the

other people. Okay, I need you to do this. I need you to do this. Can you handle this? The legislators that's elected, the members, the work was actually faster and were able to meet deadlines.

I told myself, if I don't have the way we normally used to do, it I'll still be stuck with like five bills that might have been ready to be passed. But here, everyone got to do. All we did was we went through everyone's drafts. So we'll go to your draft. If there's something you missed out, we insert it. If there's something that needed to be expunged and you included it in the draft, we expunged it. So we just did a thorough walk among the team. That's one thing. It was because of the failure of that, of not being able to train my peers, I decided to let me inculcate this culture into the department on my own level.

[00:32:59] RT: A great story and it's not common that we would – that a person in your position would have a leadership failure and flip it in such a dramatic way to get more inclusion and more activity. It sounds like a better outcome than had you done it yourself. Yes.

I got to ask you. In doing the research, I purposely didn't look this up because I wanted to hear your answer to it. But you are a Marie Curie research fellow. What is that? What are you doing with that?

[00:33:26] LDG: Well, that's a research, sickle cell research. My role in the research is actually engaging with policy makers and healthcare providers to look at the visibility of implementing the new born screening in sickle cell in Kaduna State because there have been these research gaps. In science research, I've had gaps in the past, whereby you have the data, the research findings, your recommendations. But they're just show, and that's because you did not involve the people from the start, the people that will implement these findings from the start of the research.

This group, it's called ARISE, African Research and Innovative Initiative for Sickle Cell Education. It's a consortium that involves a group of institutions and the global North in Europe, in America, in the UK, and in Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Lebanon. It's a consortium to foster learning between institutions on how to improve the care of sickle cell, care management of sickle cell.

My role there is basically to inform, to make policy makers aware of this research and the importance of the newborn screening of sickle cell disease.

[00:34:39] RT: So you've linked the research to the work that you're already doing in a way to promote more effective legislation that supports, in this case, the research on sickle cell anemia conditions.

[00:34:52] LDG: Oh, yes. I didn't get to – you froze a bit.

[00:34:54] RT: Yes. So you've linked your work and your research together for impact, what I think I hear you say. All right, so I have a couple of questions here, as we come towards the end. Tell me something that you think is true about you that almost nobody knows about you?

[00:35:10] LDG: Anxiety.

[00:35:12] RT: Anxiety. You better say more about that.

[00:35:16] LDG: People think I'm calm when it comes to engaging with people. I would say shy. People think I'm bold, and I'm out there, and Larai can face anyone. She can engage with anybody. But they don't know what goes inside. It's a lot. I'm shy. I'm anxious. I can't wait for the conversation to be over like now.

[00:35:42] RT: Ouch.

[00:35:44] LDG: Of course, you're a great guy, Rick, and I enjoy speaking with you. But it's just that the fact that it's I'm on the table. I'm being asked questions. I would rather be the one asking questions, you understand, and learning.

[00:35:56] RT: All right, so let's flip the field for everybody. This has never happened before. So you ask me a question. We'll take the heat off you a little bit. Then I got a couple more to go. But go ahead and fire a question at me. Then you can buy a little time.

[00:36:08] LDG: So from your accent, I believe you're American.

[00:36:11] RT: Yes.

[00:36:11] LDG: So how come you're not living in America? What are you doing in Portugal?

[00:36:15] RT: What am I doing in Portugal? That's a great question. Although I will say that in six days, we'll be returning to America because we're in a visa process here that's taken a lot longer than advertised, and we've run out of visa-free time.

But to your question, and this is something we talked a little bit before we got recording here about going back to school, I went back to school a number of years ago in a program that was sponsored by two universities in Europe. That was in part because the content was pretty attractive to me for what I was doing and also because I've always had a thing about living in a different part of the world in Europe. This met both of those needs.

Subsequent to that, that all worked out well. I've created quite a nice network of people who live over here and work over here. So my wife and I decided to take the jump and come over, and we still plan to come back maybe in January if we can get things sorted out. I know people ask me a lot of times, “Are you doing this because your country's messed up?” Partially, the answer is yes to that but not completely. No. I still love my country. But it's a little weird right now. So getting a different perspective from over here is healthy for us. So that's why I'm here.

All right, so listen I know you're trying to bag off, so you don't have to answer any more questions, but I got a couple more for you.

[00:37:29] LDG: All right.

[00:37:30] RT: What should I ask you that I didn't ask you that you think is important for people who are listening?

[00:37:36] LDG: I think it will still go back to gender equality. The question is do you – that I think you should have asked me in my view is do I think that that women will get to achieve all they’re advocating for in respect of gender equality?

[00:37:51] RT: And your answer to that is what?

[00:37:53] LDG: No.

[00:37:54] RT: Say more please. Why not?

[00:37:56] LDG: I said no because I think the emphasis on equality is where the problem is arising. For me, it's inclusion. So instead of advocating so much and voices so much on gender equality and the glass ceiling and all that, and I think sometimes we focus so much on the issue of we're not given a chance or you're just ignoring it. You understand?

Sometimes, it's a problem. Yes. But we don't have to advocate for it. Sometimes, we should work hard. Before you know it, you'll be called to the table for an agreement, for a discussion. Because sometimes, when you when you say 31%, 13%, you want – if you have 13 men, at least 30% of them should be women. You forget that there's a process for being elected. Do you put women to be delegates? Do you put women? It's a whole process.

For me, I think gender equality, yes, it's a dream. But in reality, when we actually achieve that, no, not in the context where people are advocating it. I don't think it's achievable because if I say I was raised in a patriarchal system, patriarchy is the whole world. Even in the West, it's patriarchical system.

[00:39:09] RT: I agree.

[00:39:11] LDG: So men want to be men. Men want to keep their places as men. The only thing is for you to look at, to promote inclusion of rural women, to promote land use for women. You understand? To promote land ownership to women. So those kind of things empower the women. Empower the women by them being independent, economically independent. That way, then you can achieve it.

Because I feel sometimes we're just focused on policies that will include women roles, that will include women. No. A huge chunk of women are still living in very poor conditions, and those

women are ahead of their homes. You understand? They're perpetually raising a poor generation because they are at a disadvantage economically. For me, it's focused on improving the welfare of women by giving them rights to resources. Not to roles, to resources.

[00:40:10] RT: I want to let people know, and we can work on this after our conversation here, that the podcast will have some links to resources and information on you and your work. So there's probably some resources that you know about that we want to capture and include in the show notes, so we can pull that stuff together after we're done with our conversation here.

Last question then, what's ahead for you? When you look forward, what's ahead for you? What do you dream about doing?

[00:40:36] LDG: Now, it's almost like being in the government has become my life. I see myself probably in the regional organization where it's ECOWAS, AU, United Nations working on policy, global policy because now I'm working on local policy, state policy. So in the future, I see myself actually being involved in a wider policy body working on a global sphere.

[00:41:06] RT: You want to make bigger impact all around the world. I believe it.

[00:41:10] LDG: Yes.

[00:41:12] RT: All right. Larai Gwani, thank you so much for coming into the swamp, having this conversation, and sharing your points of view about your work and the impact you're having and what leading is all about. Thank you very much.

[00:41:23] LDG: Thank you very much, Rick, for having me.

[00:41:26] RT: You're welcome.

[OUTRO]

[00:41:29] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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