

Discover Healthier podcast Episode 17: Gender-based Violence: Interview with Miss South Africa 2019/2020 Sasha-Lee Olivier  
July 2020

|       | Speaker   | Dialogue  |       |
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| 00:00 | Azania    | When she was crowned Miss South Africa last year, 26-year-old Sasha-Lee Olivier made it clear that she would use her reign to give a voice to girls, boys, women, and men who are victims of abuse and gender-based violence. This work is very close to her heart and that's because she herself is a survivor of sexual abuse. She joins us now. Sasha Lee! It's so wonderful to speak to you.  | 00:24 |
| 00:24 | Sasha-Lee | Thank you so much for having me, so great to speak to you too.  | 00:27 |
| 00:27 | Azania    | So, the COVID-19 pandemic has really disrupted life, all our lives. How has it affected your reign as Miss South Africa and all that you had hoped to accomplish this year?   | 00:38 |
| 00:38 | Sasha-Lee | No, as Miss South Africa, although we lend our voice to a multitude of causes, the position is definitely one that requires a lot of work on the ground and I think due to restrictions, interactions have obviously been limited but the plus side to this, as any business, we adapt. And that's key. We learn to work with what we have. And that's definitely taught me how to capitalise on what I have and what I have right now is a voice and I find that that's now amplified. So, given the state of what currently is, regarding issues like gender-based violence, our voices are necessary because they have power to still influence what occurs on the ground.   | 01:17 |
| 01:17 | Azania    | Yes, absolutely. Oh, so beautifully put. So, I was reading through your Miss South Africa profile and there was something you said that stayed with me. I just want to read it out quickly. You said: I endured years of sexual assault at the hands of an adult and when I told the grow-ups around me about what had happened to me, nobody believed me. It is why I have devoted this year of my reign to making those abused know that they are not responsible for this abuse. Taking over the Miss South Africa title means that I'm able to continue working to help women who, like me, have been sexually abused. Just tell us about how this has shaped your life and when and how did you eventually find a way to heal from what you experienced? | 02:02 |

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| 02:02 | Sasha-Lee | <p>So, I think, you know what this taught me, or what I survived taught me is that everything you experience in your life can be used in some way. But how it will be used is a decision you make. Adversity can, indeed, breed success but that's only if we allow it. Now I'm not going to say that I've always been of this understanding, I haven't always seen the bigger picture. I'd be lying to you if I said that, because this has been a painful process but as much as seven year old Sasha was being, you know sexually abused, she also had this idea that she would live up to the meaning of her name: the defender of mankind. And there was so much power in that moment and in that decision that I made. So that, plus the aspect of not being believed, I think led me to my purpose. So, titles aside, every decision in my life has always been one that was in service of protecting those who were most vulnerable. I advocate for child protection and I actively work towards curating safe spaces for these people who have survived. Now, in terms of the second question when you ask me, you know how did I heal? I'm healing. I'm healing. This is an ongoing process. And I think it starts with you know, breaking chains of silence, shame, and fear. So, it starts by speaking out. But then it gets to the next stage, I think, which is forgiveness and I've come to understand right now, that that is decision that you make, daily. It's not absolute. You know, previously I always thought that it was this feeling that was going to dawn upon me or come, you know shining down, I was automatically going to forgive. But I've understood now that it's a decision, one that I have to make daily. And there's days where I do get triggered and there is no forgiveness in sight, but I carry on and I press on anyway.</p> | 04:03 |
| 04:04 | Azania    | <p>Wow. So, it's not an event that just happens and it's pre- and post-forgiveness. It's an ongoing process.</p>   | 04:10 |
| 04:10 | Sasha-Lee | <p>Very much so.</p>   | 04:11 |
| 04:11 | Azania    | <p>So, in your work, you also speak a lot to other survivors of gender-based violence. Can you tell us about what you've learned? What being exposed to sexual assault and abuse does to a person's life. What have you learned about this from interacting with other people? I've also heard you talk about the trauma and the aftermath.</p>  | 04:34 |
| 04:24 | Sasha-Lee | <p>I recognise, you know in this, just how lucky I am to have survived not only the abuse but the aftermath of trauma which in my experience was actually more difficult. Obviously, this opinion is subjective because everyone has their own experience. But the issue of mental ill health, which is something sexual abuse could culminate in, can be</p>  | 06:48 |

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|       |           | <p>fatal. And I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in 2014 that resulted in a severe case of memory loss for me, for a period of about 2 years. Now, I'm not sure how I navigated my way through that particular period but I'm going to try and explain my process and to my understanding, you know, regarding what I experienced through journals and academia and the therapy that I had obviously been to. So, also bearing in mind that it's not a one size fits all and not everyone's experience is the same. So, abuse that occurred in my childhood years. At the time, my brain's primary function was survival, so it's not uncommon for abuse [that] occurs in this period to be suppressed and the memories to be suppressed because your brain's primary function is to survive and the unfortunate nature of this, is that it's then released in your later years and you are then meant to come to terms with everything. And that actually brings me to the aftermath of trauma in my early adulthood years. And for me, it was actually very difficult because at the time, I was in university. In certain moments I was at the top of my class and as I progressed through the years, I was then declared unfit to write my exams and I felt hopeless because it didn't only then affect my childhood. I didn't only lose my childhood; it took away pieces of you know my early adulthood life too. It was really hard for me, and I was really hard on myself at the time. So, there was a lot of forgiveness that I had to give to myself as well you know, for being so hard on myself and not really understanding what was mental ill health at the time.</p> |       |
| 06:48 | Azania    | <p>We often hear about a very deep sense of shame that this is often what accompanies rape and long-term sex abuse. That the victims often feel a very deep sense of shame. And those who have suffered at the hands of predators and perpetrators tend to feel responsible for their own abuse and become profoundly ashamed for what has happened to them. So, has it been hard speaking out about your experience of the trauma of sexual abuse?</p>   | 07:16 |
| 07:17 | Sasha-Lee | <p>Yes it has been. And I think it's not only because of the fact that I find that we are continuously silenced. It's because of the high degree of secondary trauma you face once this happens. Because we're silenced not only through, you know those well-intended questions that people ask? The one where they ask what you were wearing or why it took so long for us to speak out. The secondary trauma also comes into play when we go into the legal system, where you find that the perpetrator is innocent until proven guilty and the survivor is lying until proven otherwise, so we have a very perpetrator-centric system where everything is left up to us to prove what had happened.</p>   | 08:01 |

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| 08:01 | Azania    | And that can be very difficult for a survivor to contend with, moving forward.  | 08:06 |
| 08:06 | Sasha-Lee | Definitely.   | 08:07 |
| 08:07 | Azania    | You know the president has been speaking out on this issue. He recently said that we are experiencing 2 pandemics as a country at the moment: the COVID-19 pandemic and then the scourge of gender-based violence against women and children. Do you agree with him? Do you believe that we are also dealing with a crisis and sadly one that's been going on for generations?  | 08:28 |
| 08:29 | Sasha-Lee | I do agree with him. My message to South Africa is that we cannot solely rely on the executive to eradicate the issue of gender-based violence, you know, the implementation of policy. In fact, I was on a gender-based violence panel the other day with Luke Lamprecht who said that policy, especially in terms of child protection is very progressive in our country but the issue here is the fact that there's a disconnect in terms of what is meant to be implemented and what is experienced on the ground not only at an institutional level but also in terms of society. So, going into what happens in certain institutions. People who are meant to be holding the perpetrator accountable could still hold the same bias that perpetuates violence against women. And in these cases, there has to be this huge uproar, you know, in order for them to hold the person accountable, instead of it happening systematically, which it should be. And then in terms of society you'll find that although there are various policies that are implemented at the level of the executive, the society that breeds the perpetrator is still very much at large. So, these people can be put away but the society that bred the perpetrator is still at large and I find ourselves honestly, just in this multi-faceted war. | 09:56 |
| 09:57 | Azania    | Sasha-Lee, I want to stay with that point a little bit longer. What do you believe are the dynamics that breed perpetrators in our society and silence our survivors as you've referenced?  | 10:08 |
| 10:08 | Sasha-Lee | I think it's the socialisation process. It's how we were raised, and a lot of people are actually just looking to government in order to make the change and very little people are actually introspecting and that is where it actually matters. The issue I find, is actually to be the one of cognitive dissonance among men. Now cognitive dissonance for those of the people that don't understand what that is. It's a term in  | 11:06 |

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|       |           | psychology that says that someone holds 2 or more contradicting beliefs. So, a man may think that rape is a problem but then he may also think that it's not a male issue. And then, on top of that, we have the issue of language which we've seen often in the media is one that speaks of women who get raped and not of men who rape them and in that, they appropriate blame and make the sole focus be on women when it in fact should be on men.  |       |
| 11:06 | Azania    | That's such a powerful point you make, and we can all do something in changing that. You're a gender activist and you have chosen social responsibility, campaigned for the duration of your reign. It's Beauty with Purpose, and we've seen this #itsnotyourfault campaign that you have embarked on as part of your reign. Can you tell us a little bit more about it?   | 11:28 |
| 11:29 | Sasha-Lee | So, our rape comfort pack aims to liberate and celebrate those who have survived sexual assault. It actually serves as a dignity pack because we found that the most important thing for survivors to understand is that it is not their fault. It's something that really resonated with me once I came across this project. So, our focus here is to bring this source of dignity to the survivor in a time when they need it most. So, it's a comfort pack that constitutes a couple of health items and sanitary items that they would need in that moment of their statement being taken and some sugar, just to get them through that moment where there would be a high degree of secondary trauma as they would have to be stating what actually occurred. | 12:21 |
| 12:21 | Azania    | So, this pack is intended to provide them with what they need in this moment of trauma and transition?   | 12:29 |
| 12:30 | Sasha-Lee | Yes. Definitely.   | 12:31 |
| 12:31 | Azania    | So, you provide them for different types of survivors?   | 12:34 |
| 12:35 | Sasha-Lee | Yes, because what we find is that you know, the issue of rape transcends not only gender but there are different ages so unfortunately, there are kids. There are grown people who have unfortunately had to survive this ordeal. So, what we find is that we have to ascertain that what is needed is there. This is a reality every 26 seconds for someone in our country and right now, it should be regarded as an essential item. I'd hope obviously that the funds that we've raised wouldn't come to being used but statistics are against us in this moment because it's an occurrence every 26 seconds, so it has   | 13:26 |

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|       |           | to be there right now. Remedial action is necessary until such a time that there is a proactive approach that's properly formulated in order to combat this.  |       |
| 13:26 | Azania    | As you say, you've included men and boys, and they're often not highlighted as victims of sexual abuse.   | 13:33 |
| 13:34 | Sasha-Lee | That is true and it's very unfortunate because what I find is that sometimes you know, the perpetrators who are sometimes seen to be men could have been victims to this as well. It could have been behaviour that they have seen and that they now project and it's unfortunate that our focus is solely on women experiencing this. However, I am going to say that women are disproportionately affected by the issue of sexual assault and the girl child is the most vulnerable   | 14:07 |
| 14:07 | Azania    | Absolutely. Why has it been important for the message that is captured in that hashtag, it's not your fault. Why is that important to communicate to survivors?   | 14:19 |
| 14:19 | Sasha-Lee | I think cause that's the first moment of healing. To understand that it was not your fault. That you had no bearing over that person who inflicted this harm on you and although it was something that resonated solely on me that moment that I came across it, I do believe that it's something that myself and survivors share. The fact that we feel like we could have done something, and I'd say it stems from society and their view and how it is that they appropriate blame not only to the media but through other mechanisms as well   | 14:57 |
| 14:58 | Azania    | People are afraid to speak out. You mentioned language earlier, you mentioned media. Some stories make it to major headlines, there's an absolute uproar and outrage about what has happened, but we still hear that we are hearing only a fraction of the cases that are out there. How do we inspire others to speak out in order for them to rebuild their lives?  | 15:22 |
| 15:22 | Sasha-Lee | You know, I understand that my presence on this platform would be a future reimagined for them. Understand that in me speaking out they will in some way find the strength to do so too. It's something that I actually experience in my direct messages on Instagram. It's not always this roar, being so vocal about it, it's the quiet acknowledgment that it actually happened and going out and seeking help. Not many have the strength to go out and say it to everyone but I think there's still so much strength in admitting that to yourself, that although at one point you were vulnerable, although at some point someone did take advantage of that, it's not your fault, and there's so much power in that. | 16:10 |

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| 16:11 | Azania    | We want to support the work that you're doing, and we'll give, of course information on how members of society can become part of your efforts to provide these rape comfort packs. But I want to look at you know because you are our reigning Miss South Africa 2019. You're currently studying a double major in Marketing and Psychology at Wits University but at the same time, you're working on promoting your own business as a young entrepreneur, you've got your responsibilities with the crown. What are some of your personal hopes, the things that you hope to achieve personally?   | 16:46 |
| 16:47 | Sasha-Lee | I've always wanted to be a teacher and being an assistant teacher, it's just – it all stems from my love for kids. Although their faces don't say it on Mondays when I see them in class, I know that they love me too. But it's always started and ended with kids for me so I've always hoped to open my own school and a Montessori kindergarten in fact, and I think that my passion for marketing and communication is something that's always been [part] of me, it's how I communicate my purpose and the issue regarding psychology and why I took that up is also, it stems from a lot of you know, the healing that I wanted to undergo and also understand what was going on with me, what was going on with everyone else and society and how to be a part of the solution. I think Vusi Thembekwayo said it so well, I think it was 2 weeks ago when he said we are looking for [17:42] that we can't be looking for people save us. We have the power within ourselves and I think that that's the one thing we need to remember. | 17:49 |
| 17:50 | Azania    | Absolutely. Well, all of the best with all of these wonderful ambitions but as we wrap, what are your final thoughts, something that you'd like to leave our listeners with, especially those who have survived sexual abuse and gender-based violence.   | 18:01 |
| 18:02 | Sasha-Lee | I think it's the idea that your darkest moments can indeed give birth to the lightest and the brightest. It's the fact that adversity can indeed breed success and you have the decision to make that a reality.  | 18:19 |
| 18:19 | Azania    | Well, thank you so much Sasha-Lee for joining us but also for having the courage of your conviction. We wish you all of the best in your reign as Miss South Africa but in moving forward as well, South Africa is completely behind you. We're absolutely blessed as a country to have a person like you campaigning for such an important cause.  | 18:37 |
| 18:38 | Sash-Lee  | Thank you so much Azania, thank you so much for having me.  | 11:40 |

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| 11:40 | Azania | Thank you. That was Sasha-Lee Olivier. Now, if you want to get involved search for Sasha-Lee Olivier welfare cause on <a href="http://backabuddy.co.za">backabuddy.co.za</a> where you can contribute R120 towards a rape comfort pack. | 18:56 |
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