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**CHRIS DAVIS:** Welcome to the Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast, or the CARC Podcast. I'm Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School. And today, it is my great pleasure to be in conversation with and introducing Dr. Gloria Ayee. Dr. Ayee is a lecturer in the Department of Government at Harvard University, and she's a faculty associate with the CAR Center for Human Rights at Harvard Kennedy School.

Her areas of specialization include American politics, comparative politics, behavior and identity politics, and race and ethnic politics. Her research interests include transitional justice, truth and reconciliation commissions, human rights, political reconciliation, politics, and popular culture. Dr. Ayee received her PhD in political science from Duke University. She's the co-editor of "Perspectives on Women's Leadership and Gender Inequality," a collection of essays that takes an interdisciplinary approach to exploring issues connected to women's leadership and women's rights advancement around the world.

Among the courses she teaches that are available for Harvard Extension students are transitional justice and the politics of truth commissions, race, film, and American politics, and global ethnic politics. Dr. Ayee, many thanks for joining us today.

**GLORIA AYEE:** It's my pleasure. Thanks so much for the opportunity to be in conversation with you.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So I wanted to take the opportunity to talk about a couple of different subjects. First of all, you had written a piece earlier in the pandemic. And I want to make a quick reference to that, because I would like to ask you some questions based on that. So you had written specifically about women in leadership roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women have been significantly underrepresented in political leadership positions globally. And gender discrimination and inequality in the political sphere remains a key issue that many nations contend with.

"The different approaches to crisis management and responses to public health concerns taken by men and women in positions of political power has come under scrutiny, igniting the debate about the role of women in politics. Women are often encouraged to emulate men's leadership styles. However, during a crisis like the pandemic, women in positions of political leadership tend to be more successful. Because they generally embody traits like empathy and humility in addition to qualities like assertiveness and confidence that they can leverage in their favor."

So that was a quote from your piece. And I wanted to hear from you. Can you talk about specific examples of leadership, empathetic leadership that these women leaders have demonstrated through policies they have implemented or enacted in their stewardship of countries during the pandemic? You make reference to Bangladesh, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand, et cetera, et cetera. Leaders as diverse as Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel, Tsai Ing-wen. I'd love to hear from you examples of where women's leadership has been particularly successful in addressing the crisis.

**GLORIA AYEE:** Yes. Thanks so much for that question and for reading the piece and mentioning it. I hope that our listeners will also go and look it up and read it. I wrote it as part of efforts to promote my book, my co-edited book on women's leadership and gender inequality. And it's published on Social Science Matters, a blog by Palgrave Macmillan. So it's available online for anyone who's interested.

But in promoting the book, I was thinking about what issues were really important for us to be focusing on during the pandemic. And there are many, because of course in 2020, we were dealing with a variety of issues, especially here in the United States, ranging from the pandemic itself to racial issues and injustice and police brutality and all of that. But I felt like in terms of global issues that people could connect with, the COVID-19 pandemic was at the forefront, and I wanted to talk about approaches to addressing the pandemic that have been more successful than others.

And what researchers had found is that countries that were led by women political leaders were generally faring better in managing and addressing the issues connected to the pandemic, be those the health crisis itself and also the economic fallout. And so as you mentioned, a list of countries, but notably, New Zealand, Germany, Taiwan, their leaders were really at the forefront of finding ways to handle the health crisis so that the fallout, the economic fallout and the health problems that were manifested around the globe, would be minimal in their countries.

And so especially in New Zealand, we've seen cases-- not as many cases as we have seen in other parts of the world. Just because the management of the pandemic was so effective. Policies being put in place to minimize the spread. Putting lockdowns in place and all of that was really a central approach. And tying that back into the piece I wrote, the issue is not that women per se are better leaders. So that wasn't necessarily the point of the piece.

The piece was highlighting the fact that gendered approaches to leadership-- so traits that are typically associated with women, or women leaders in this case, are most effective in crisis management situations. So be that in a health crisis like a pandemic or in business crises that may emerge. So the economic dimension of the pandemic.

Gendered traits like assertiveness, humility, teamwork, those are all things that we can think about when we're thinking about what makes an effective leader. And what we've seen, especially coming out of this pandemic, is that an approach to leadership that focuses on listening to the science, following the science, embracing more empathetic values, communicating effectively, being willing to listen to others and while also being assertive, has been the best sort of approach.

So if leaders who are men were taking an approach to leadership that embraced the values that I'm discussing, we would probably be seeing really successful approaches to dealing with the pandemic there as well. So it's not just the fact that-- I'm not suggesting that women are necessarily better leaders than men, but the gendered traits that are associated with leadership styles make handling crises either successful or not. And so that's essentially what we were seeing.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Yes. And it's certainly interesting to consider also. Because I think since you wrote the piece, to cite one example that you mention in the piece-- and I think we referenced earlier Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand. Her navigating New Zealand through the rapid increase of cases thanks to the Delta variant. I think she's been lauded and praised for her continued leadership. So I think even since the piece, I mean, there are certainly concrete examples of this, yes.

**GLORIA AYEY:** I agree 100%, yeah.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** My next question to you, Dr. Ayeey, building on that is, do you think that these examples of good leadership that have embraced qualities, as you mentioned, more typically associated with gendered expectations of women in leadership roles, do you think the success of these approaches will stick with us and the lessons learned from the crisis and how women leaders have addressed the crisis in different ways in their respective countries will stick with us and perhaps be used as a lesson learned for all leaders and male leaders as well well after the pandemic?

**GLORIA AYEY:** That's a fantastic question. You would hope that countries would be looking to others that have been more successful at dealing with the pandemic as we are in the midst of the pandemic. But we haven't necessarily been seeing that. But hopefully as things improve and we look back-- history is always the best teacher-- we as a global community and our political leaders would be able to look back and see what strategies were most effective in certain cases and what didn't work as well.

And not looking at it necessarily from a gendered standpoint, but just looking at it critically and objectively and recognizing that there are certain ways of handling crises that prove more effective than others. And embracing that, there's the hope that that would happen. But one can only be optimistic about that. But as the pandemic has been ongoing, we haven't necessarily been seeing models arising and everyone trying to follow a model that has worked in one country. But hopefully, as history will teach us, there will be better approaches in the future.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Absolutely. And we cannot predict the future. And this is maybe more of a comment than a question to you. But I do wonder if some of the things that we're talking about that you mentioned in the piece that you've written about, we'll also be seeing examples of this as different countries around the world experience the climate crisis. Which I don't want to say is in the future. It's something that is certainly with us now. But as we move forward, I wonder if some of these same examples of leadership styles-- empathy, listening, all the things you mentioned-- will also be exhibited in similar ways as the climate crisis develops over the world.

**GLORIA AYEY:** That's an excellent point, Chris. And of course, the climate crisis is with us currently and something that needs to be addressed sooner rather than later. And everyone needs to be on board. Every country needs to be sort of invested in finding ways to tackle the climate crisis. And of course, some of the loudest voices we have seen in response to the climate crisis has been women.

And so there's that hope that there as well-- there'll be a more empathetic approach to understanding the problems that our world is facing and recognizing that the issue is not just about how we are living today, but what we can do to protect the planet for future generations. So hopefully in that respect, our leaders will really make the right decisions there as well.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Certainly, yes. So I wanted to pivot a little bit and talk about the course that you have taught and teach-- Race, Film, and American Politics, if I may. The course examines the diverse and multifaceted ways in which racial and ethnic identity of Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Arab Americans has been represented in American film. I think you reference how the portrayal of different population groups in film has shaped our understanding of what it means to be an American and how film has historically had the power to shape and inform race relations. I'm curious to hear, can you talk a little bit about what you hope students take away from the course?

**GLORIA AYEE:** Thank you, Chris. As you alluded to in your gracious introduction, I do quite a bit of interdisciplinary work. So the classes I teach are pretty interdisciplinary in that respect as well. This Race, Film, and American Politics class is the sort of class that draws in a lot of people for a variety of reasons. Film is a medium that appeals to most people because it's visual. And for that reason, there are numerous benefits of film as an instruction tool and also some challenges that should be considered.

But all in all, a film on race-- and of course on race and film, looking at its connection to American politics really allows students to have the opportunity to think about films they may have seen, possibly, and of course some of the classics that they may not have seen. And think critically about the history of race in the United States and how that has shaped the social and political landscape.

So with this particular class, we start off by looking at the construction of racial and ethnic identity, which of course, is really central to understanding race relations in the United States. Because a lot of times, people take the way that race is defined at face value. We have a very colloquial and specific understanding of race. Historically it's been thought of as biologically based or rooted in science.

But what we know is that race is a social construction, and the same for ethnic identity in many ways as well. And so understanding the roots of our racial classification system is central to understanding the political implications of race. And of course, the film industry, Hollywood to be specific, has really been central in teaching our society about what race is and representing different racial and ethnic groups, often in highly problematic ways. Sometimes in positive ways, and we're seeing that more so today.

And so the course really takes us through a historical examination of racial and ethnic representation in film, looking at how racial and ethnic minorities have been portrayed. The stereotypes associated with those portrayals, the implications of those stereotypes. Looking at how race and film was connected to the civil rights movement, for example. How it shaped issues like acceptance of interracial relationships, which is really interesting and fascinating to think about.

And then more contemporary issues about how we are viewing film and how the industry is actually changing in recent years to be more inclusive in terms of those who are on film and also those who are working behind the camera. So the course really tackles a lot of things related to the film industry and race and politics. But there's definitely something for everyone in this class.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** I was struck by, yeah, as you mentioned, the interdisciplinary approach. Because I would assume for many modern audiences, students included, when viewing or talking about films from these other eras, I think many of us would tend to not necessarily act or see them in a vacuum, but through our modern lens, view and analyze these works.

And I think in your course and through the syllabus, it's very clear that you put a lot of emphasis, a lot of effort, on contextualizing individual works. And also offering up a lot of information on the historical context in American history, contemporary events of different eras. And also the history of Asian Americans in film, how they've been represented in American film. Arab Americans, Native Americans, et cetera, et cetera.

I can certainly see the value and the importance in simultaneously talking about these films through a cinematic lens and also offering a lot of context that's historical so that we appreciate and understand the era, the times in which the films were made and released and absorbed, at least initially.

**GLORIA AYEE:** That's an excellent point. And I'm really glad that you talked about how films are not created in a vacuum. And so of course, we should not be viewing them as such. But we really need to be contextualizing what we are viewing. But often, purely because of the nature of the films most of us watch, we are doing it for entertainment value.

And we often come away from watching films not understanding whether they are truly representative of reality, or if they are fictionalized in some cases. Especially when we're talking about films that are purporting to be portraying history or historical events. And so it's really essential that we are contextualizing the films. Just because it's important to know about the social and political issues that were occurring in the period in which the films were created and also the issue surrounding whatever is being portrayed-- the content of the film itself. What it's trying to teach or reflect or mirror about our society.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Thank you. And on that note, I wanted to close with asking you about something that's related to this. Which is in recent years, we have seen the landscape of how older films are viewed and discussed and engaged with very differently. There is sometimes a very political atmosphere in how these films are engaged with. As we've seen with other subjects that look at a history or popular culture or media through a critical race lens, there's a lot of pushback for various reasons. There are attempts at censorship sometimes.

And I was thinking as an example of a very prominent film, *Gone with the Wind*, which two years ago-- well, over the course of that film's existence, there's been a lot of discussion around it. But most recently two years ago, there was a lot of attention paid when Turner Classic Movies and HBO presented a new contextualized introduction talking about the film's history, its depiction of the Civil War. There was a lot of controversy that accompanied that.

The introduction was made by a professor of cinema studies at the University of Chicago. And I wanted to ask you what role the academy plays in contextualizing and analyzing these films. They're also historical documents. But as our understanding of history and racial representation evolves and develops over the years, how important do you think the academy, higher education, the role it will play in discussions of how we can and should engage with these films?

**GLORIA AYEE:** Another really brilliant question, Chris. The academy has to play a central role, I believe. Because in many ways, we are the keepers of history, of knowledge. And so we have to be at the forefront of efforts to create a better understanding of different mediums, film included. On the issue of censorship, it's highly political or politicized in itself. And when we're talking about films that may have a problematic element, especially in their portrayal or representation of history or marginalized groups, there's often this fear that, how are we going to tackle the canon of films that have been classified as important to American history or labeled as classics? And of course, *Gone with the Wind* is one of them.

I do not teach *Gone with the Wind* in this particular course, but I teach an equally controversial film, *Birth of a Nation*, and we start out with that. And I believe that we have to continue teaching films like that. Because we have to understand our history. It doesn't serve anyone well to sweep everything under the rug. And so it is really critical that we are able to contextualize the films, thinking about the political and social environment in which they were created and what they were trying to depict. Often highly sensitive racial issues that we, in this case, connected to slavery, of course.

But it is really essential that scholars, historians, filmmakers are working together to give background to these film so that the audience members will understand the history. Otherwise, we watch the films and just leave not-- especially if you're not a historian yourself and most people aren't going to just go out and start digging up information and background about each and every film that they watch.

And so it is, of course, useful to allow these films to be played, but of course contextualizing them is important. And that's where the academy comes in. And you have experts speaking to the context in which the films were created. And I think it's the best way out in how to tackle handling films that deal with problematic or sensitive issues.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And when I said censorship, I should have clarified also that what I meant was efforts to censoring the conversation around these films. I think that there was a lot of resistance to even having a conversation about whether this is a film that's historically accurate, whether it celebrates slavery in the Civil War. I imagine there will continue to be those kind of efforts made when we're contextualizing film history. And I agree with you. I think the academy has a strong role to play in honestly and accurately having that conversation.

**GLORIA AYEE:** Yeah. I'm so glad you clarified that, because yes, we often think of censorship as censorship of the films themselves and their content. But then censorship of the conversation surrounding the films are also issues that we have to pay attention to. Because we need to, of course in a society that encourages free speech, allow people to express their opinions about the films and call out material that is either highly offensive, which is the worst case scenario. Blatantly racist, highly offensive, misrepresenting different groups is also something that should be considered.

And what often plays into the conversation is that it's art. And so art should be allowed to be as expressive in whatever way it chooses to be. And that is true to some extent, but then also there should be limits in how we allow films to be centered in our society and how we're using them as instructional tools as well.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And on that note, Dr. Ayee, I will say thank you so much for joining me today. I could ask you many, many more questions. There are so many different avenues of your teaching, your work, that I would be fascinated to hear more about. But thank you for your time today.

**GLORIA AYEE:** Thank you so much, Chris. It was a pleasure to speak with you.

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**CHRIS DAVIS:** You have listened to the CARC Podcast. Now this is the podcast for the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.