

PROGRAM DATE: 2019-03-07

PROGRAM NAME: WOMANITY – WOMEN IN UNITY

GUEST NAME: MS JESSYE LAPENN – CHARGÉ D’AFFAIRES – US MISSION IN SOUTH AFRICA

SPEAKER	TRANSCRIPTION
DR. MALKA	Hello, I’m Dr. Amaleya Goneos-Malka, welcome to ‘Womanity – Women in Unity’. The show that celebrates prominent and ordinary African Women’s milestone achievements in their struggles for liberation, self-emancipation, human rights, democracy, racism, socio-economic class division and gender based violence.
DR. MALKA	Joining us in our Johannesburg studio today is Chargé D’affaires at the US Mission in South Africa; Miss Jessye Lapenn who took up this position in December 2016 after first serving as Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Pretoria from July 216. Prior to this she was the Chief of Staff to the Undersecretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights at the Department of State in Washington DC. She was also Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Kigali from 2012 to 2014 and some of her overseas tours have included posts in the Middle East from Jeddah, to Riyadh to Baghdad and Jerusalem. Welcome to the show!
MS LAPENN	Thank you so much; thanks for having me.
DR. MALKA	To begin with, your foreign affairs career started in 1994, coincidentally the same year as South Africa’s first democratic elections and we’re now on the eve of our 6 th democratic elections and you rose through various domestic assignments and international roles to now serve the United States in South Africa; so to begin with can you share with us a little bit about some of the roles and responsibilities that come with this position?
MS LAPENN	Sure. So first when you think of that sort of, what’s your... you know, the question is like what’s your job...
DR. MALKA	...exactly.....
MS LAPENN	...right...it’s a hard question in terms of every day is different. I think first I love my job; I have a great job so I’m lucky in that respect, but if I think about it, it strikes me there’s almost two aspects; one is I think probably what people think of when they think of as a diplomat, right, the idea is I represent America here. So what’s your job? I’m America in South Africa is literally my job and I lead an extraordinary and talented team in explaining to South Africans who we are as Americans; what do we do, what do we care about, what are our values and how can we find points of intersection between ourselves and our values and South Africans and their values and in many ways that’s actually a pretty easy job because there’s so many points of confluences, of shared interests, of common experiences. I also, in the same space, I’m explaining South Africa to Washington, so as Washington works its way through difficult policy questions I say well let me tell you how South African’s look at this issue; let me tell you how they’re likely to react and so I serve as a bridge; an explanation between the two, but with the focus being here, of who are we. The interesting thing though, is that is a big...let’s say two thirds of my job but the other probably one third which would be less visible is actually leading a really large organisation. So I think because of the way diplomacy works people see one person and they think that person is doing everything....
DR. MALKA	...it’s a bit like the iceberg analogy....
MS LAPENN	...completely, or, you know, it’s the duck who...with the feet underneath and you can’t see but our feet underneath are actually 1200 people, which I think,

	<p>not that numbers tell a whole story, but it's a really interesting indicator of US literal, physical commitment to South Africa. So we've got 1200 people; we are in Durban, in Cape Town, in Johannesburg and also in Pretoria. Those 1200 people represent a range of bureau interests and skills and competencies; everything from commerce to culture to co-operation on law-enforcement issues, so we really run the gamut. Of the 1200 roughly 400 are Americans who've come here with their families; their kids, their husbands, their boyfriends, their mother's-in-law, whatever, or they...all of them come and they're really living here in it and then we have 800 local staff, South African staff, who are the people who explain year-in-year-out as we transition; here's what's going on, here's your contacts and so in addition to being the face of America in South Africa I also actually am leading what in the corporate world would be a really big business.</p>
DR. MALKA	That's for sure, well a staff of 1200...
MS LAPENN	...1200....
DR. MALKA	...and servicing citizens, not just American citizens, but also South Africans and anyone from visa requirements of tourists coming into the country, so it is a breadth of portfolio. You've mentioned the focus from the South African point of view; are you also working on other projects in other countries on the continent?
MS LAPENN	<p>Yes, so, in many ways I'm really lucky because the American commitment to diplomacy is significant, by which I mean we actually have an embassy in every country in the region. I think that reflects our personnel and financial commitment and also our sense that the context in every country is different; because I'm sitting in South Africa doesn't mean I know what's what in Eswatini; I've got colleagues who are there, who are day in day out working on issues from Eswatini to Egypt. But, we also know that there are lots of interests and programmes that make sense to structure regionally, so then I work with my counterparts across the region and we've got really interesting projects actually that are regional, particularly in terms of youth outreach, right, as we think about demographic change and the youth population both as an opportunity and there's challenges that face youth, but ultimately for all of us, this reflects opportunity and possibility. Those are common problems across the region and so we work together on youth related programmes and we've got two, if I think about it, that I particularly love and have personally spent a bunch of time in; one is called...we call....everything has an acronym it seems in government; the RLC, which is the Regional Leadership Centre. It's based in Pretoria at UNISA and it brings together young people from across Sub-Saharan Africa for leadership programmes and they come either from government, from non-government, from business and they participate in a really extraordinary curriculum and it's one of those programmes where I wish I could go visit it more but actually I can't and it's somebody else's job to get to be that lucky, but it's amazing, amazing young people and one of the things that we've found from that programme is part of what they get is being together; that they're able to engage in projects that have across border components. Similarly, there's a programme that's actually, certainly in South Africa but I think elsewhere on the continent, quite prominent and that is...it's the Young African Leadership Initiative or YALI's; in South Africa it's the Mandela Washington Fellowship Programme and this is a really competitive programme that takes hundreds of young Africans to the States every year and they participate in a six week residence programme on a US campus and they're grouped by government, by non-profit or by corporate, sort of three different tracks and it's no exaggeration, I think, to say that when they come back they describe a life-changing experience and I think...I mean I think what they mean is when they think the experience of what is life-</p>

	<p>changing; one; the content, the actual curriculum around leadership in their sector. Two; the connectivity from across the region and then three; what is it like to have this experience in America, to be in America, not to watch it from afar or on TV. I know what we call our YALI's, I have spent a lot of, lot of time with them both before they go, but then more particularly when they come back, so sort of great, you've had this experience, now what? Now what are you going to do with, frankly this amazing opportunity and privilege, how are you going to take it and make more of it, whether for yourself, your community, your country.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Those are really interesting programmes and it seems as though the emphasis is on leadership and I almost look at leadership as if you're able to direct and inform at the top end, that when they come back, hopefully there'll be a ripple effect of what their knowledge gains have been out of the country to then bring back into the market. So it must be fascinating on the programme of when they reflect, what they're going to do once they're on home turf.</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>I think so and we try to build it in from the beginning to say, you know, find that mix of going and being present, be where you are, but also be thinking how are you going to incorporate it, what are you going to do, how is this going to contribute. It's interesting in terms of that you know we've done many different exchange programmes for many years and I...last year was with a former Fulbright so....Fulbright which is one of our oldest and most prestigious of our exchange programmes and I was...we were doing a send-off for the new Fulbright cohort and we asked a former Fulbrighter to speak; he had done a Fulbright in the late 80's and he had come from Mpumalanga; he had gone to Forte Hare and in the late 80's he went to do a masters in mathematics at Berkeley in California and...(I'm quickly doing my math) about 35 years later as he is now one of the most prominent South Africans in the financial sector; he told the story of his journey and of where this Fulbright experience fit in and how it had, without question, changed his life on return and contributed to who he was and his charge to the new cohort was quite extraordinary, it was; take this seriously, this is an opportunity for your country and you are part of it and make the most of it for yourself but also make the most of it for South Africa. I mean I was like literally tearing up because it was so extraordinary; we had done something but he had made it something of value.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>And taking on that responsibility and I think that that's part of the values within the African context, not so much from an individualistic perspective, but this view as collective and what you do within that collective space and the people that matter, not just on the home-front but broader, in those communities.</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>Very much, I would say if I think about my time here a piece of it is what do I do, what do I bring but also what do I get, what do I learn, how do I be here and learn the spirit of Ubuntu and open myself up to experiences and to knowledge that South Africans have to share and I also have lived in Rwanda so I...it's similar there, you know, what experiences and knowledge do I borrow and take from Rwandans in exchange for whatever knowledge and experience I bring.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>You've spoken about being the face of America and also about some of the work that you do particularly with these exchange programmes and also the presence of America across the continent really demonstrates commitment of having a foot in Africa and when I look at this as part of foreign policy, from a South African point of view promoting trade, investment and also positively contributing to the image of not just South Africa but Africa to the world is inducted in the policy rhetoric. We're a growing continent, your focus on youth; we've got a population that's going to be about 2.5bn by 2050 where most of them are going to be under the age</p>

	<p>of 30, which means that there's got to be economic investments to sustain people. The US Foreign Policy encompasses, I believe it...I think it's five sectors of peace security, countering terrorism, economic growth and development, promoting democracy and governance. I read that last year you'd made a pledge of 16 billion rand to help control the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa; there's AGOA, the Africa Growth Opportunity Act; so could you just expand a bit more for us on some of the US foreign policy and how it applies and benefits the country.</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>Absolutely. So you mentioned the HIV commitment, I think...I think you know, most of your listeners know that the US commitment to work with African partners to address HIV is now...we've just had our 15th anniversary, it's a 15 year programme at an extraordinary sort of truly unprecedented level, like never before in the history of the world has any kind of commitment to a single disease been what we are doing with HIV. The South African story in particular is extraordinary because...because of the scale of the population and the scale of the epidemic, but also the scale of the science and the research going on here and so our investment you can think of in many ways; one it's in terms of research. What we're doing on the research side is extraordinary, it is world class, it is...you know when you think about partnership what does that mean, it means you need both sides and that is the story of the US/South African research partnership in HIV. Another piece of it is working with government to get people on treatment, so the approach now, under the global fund and UNAID is that 90% of people know their status, 90% of those people are on antiretroviral's and of them 90% are virally suppressed and so they call it the 90-90-90 goals and that is what we are addressing here in South Africa but across the region to bring the epidemic under control. One of the challenges that we have is reaching the most vulnerable populations which in South Africa is really adolescent girls and young women, so it is young women age 15-24, how do we reach them and support them to prevent themselves from getting HIV and it's really hard 'cause this doesn't happen in a vacuum, this happens in a complicated social context, the context of a family, of an individual, of a community and so we've gone about it in a number of ways, ways that have been really successful but where we still have with South African partners, a lot of work to do. So we are sponsoring a programme, not actually just in South Africa but in 10 countries across the region called DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AID's Free, Mentored and Safe) so DREAMS and....</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>...that's a good acronym...</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>...it's a good...it's a good...it's a good one, it's much better than many government acronym's and it's about recognising the context of an individual young woman or adolescent girl and trying to support her where she is with her peers and to basically support her to do what she needs to do to keep herself safe and strong and we've had great success. What's been terrific about this programme is we've found wonderful local partners but we've also found US businesses who are in the health sector who want to come in and partner with us as well. So DREAMS has been a really exciting...it's been a really exciting programme....</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>...and the challenge, I would say, with something like HIV/AIDS is that I felt that there was a really strong education movement around it which was substantiated and kept going but then it almost lapsed and the reality is that it's not a once-off thing, education has to be ongoing because each generation has a successive generation that comes up and you have to talk to the next generation.</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>I think that's absolutely right, it's sort of...it's not done and it's interesting to think about....there was a period of crises and that created an unbelievable response and we no longer feel ourselves to be in crises, but 1200 South</p>

	<p>African girls become HIV positive every week; that feels like crises to me but we're not...you can't operate at crises levels over 15 years and so I think there's value, not in thinking of crises, but of thinking of urgency, right, because what urgency does is it pulls our parties to the table and I do think in addressing HIV/AIDS that's really important, to get to that point where everybody comes to the table all together with focus, with purpose, with intentionality; okay university what do you bring, okay business what do you bring, government, international partner; all of us at the table because 1200 girls every week is 1200 girls too many.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>And in terms of a developments; so besides the work that goes into the healthcare focus from a trade point of view and development space?</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>So from a trade point of view you mentioned AGOA (the African Growth and Opportunity Act) which I know you have listeners across the continent so I will say that South Africa is the greatest beneficiary of AGOA, which I hope women entrepreneurs outside of South Africa will take up the gauntlet because it is...it's a trade preference that allows for the export to the United States of certain goods, duty free, and we have been thrilled by the uptake of African entrepreneurs to export to the US. We spend, as you mentioned, a lot of time from the embassy focussing on the trade and investment relationships, so in South Africa it is...it's largely US/South Africa but we also recognise that the nature of the market is such that both African countries and we in the United States benefit from greater regional trade integration. What do I mean by that? Well we've got a platform which is called the Trade Hub and we have at this point three Trade Hubs, one is East Africa, one is West Africa and one in Southern Africa and South Africa and their focus is twofold. It is facilitating inter-regional trade and then using that as a platform for trade with the United States and we've seen great...I'm not wearing them today, but often I wear earrings that are imported to the United States from South Africa and they are under the AGOA and it's my sort of small, quick fashion gendered example of, you know, what does the use of AGOA look like and we have huge progress, but we know that we've got to keep at it; that the...the value for bilateral trade can only grow and that the development needs our significance and one of the important ways to address those needs is through increasing trade and commerce.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>And perhaps it's not the right way of looking at it but I look back to the point we raised earlier in terms of the demographic profile and the number of youth that we're going to have looking from a future perspective, that Africa's going to be the continent where we've got a workforce because if we look at the likes of Europe and other nations it's an ageing population and thinking about our world becoming more and more and more globally connected and having these opportunities, whether it's from a AGOA or other bilateral commitments, it just...it shows that we can use Africa perhaps as a workforce that could be utilising their talents to feed into other regions.</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>Very, very much and I've been...been struck, particularly in South Africa, one of the challenges where we look to partner with South Africans is around issues related to youth unemployment, which is...it's a significant challenge, one that as the nature of work changes we need to redouble our efforts to address. There's a terrific programme in South Africa called Harambee which we've very happily have been supporting for the last, let me say two years, which is focused on skills development for youth and also connecting non-working youth with work opportunities and one of the things I particularly like Harambee is that...about Harambee is they're really a learning organisation. These are hard problems, there isn't easy solutions to the challenge of youth unemployment and I think they're doing an excellent</p>

	<p>job of learning by doing and then sharing what they're learning and they've recently in fact expanded their programme to Rwanda, so having worked there previously, I'm thrilled to see that and I think they'll...they'll have a new...as an organisation they'll have learning because the South African labour market is different than the Rwandan labour market, education is different, skills different, needs different, all of it is different, but, there are some common threads and some common learning and they have had terrific success in placing hundreds and thousands of young people into jobs and getting them ready to do those jobs and do them well and through them I have met a lot of South African young people who've gone on a journey, from not working to working and thriving and they always say "Not For Us Without Us" and I love that expression. You can't...you can't decide...policy makers can't sit in their office and say yes this is what young people need, this is what we'll do for them; young people have to be part of those conversations, part of those solutions, so "Not For Us Without Us."</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Those are really inspiring stories of programmes that work, that you really achieve the outcomes and it's not someone going off doing a programme, coming back and not being able to benefit from it. You've mentioned that you were in Rwanda prior to your post in South Africa; Rwanda for me is one of those countries which is...well I think still today it's got the highest percentage of women in parliament and I always think that by having a strong presence within a power space of women, that that has ripple effects in terms of the policies, in terms of how it benefits women in the country; so could you just share some of your perspectives of being in Rwanda?</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>So firstly very interesting on that, I once was asking a senior government official...Rwanda has had a very progressive and inclusive policy around LGBTI individuals, in addition, and...and I was asking what was driving that policy as I was congratulating them on their inclusive approach and respect for human rights of LGBTI individuals; what drove it, where was this policy...explain the origins of the policy and the answer was "our challenges are too great not to include everyone in the solution" and I think there's really something to that broadly, that the development and other challenges that the continent is facing and it's not unique to Africa but the continent's development challenges are significant and so without bringing everyone to the table, it's not realistic to think we're going to get all the ideas that we need and all of the solutions out there and so an inclusive approach to problem solving is crucial. Now, living in South Africa, I see extraordinary women who are at the top of...I mean I've had the privilege of working across sectors, right, I...as a diplomat I get to work on a little bit of everything and I have been privileged to engage with South African women who are running media, running finance, running ministries, all of it and for me learning from them as individuals, as women at the top of their fields, doing challenging and meaningful work has been a real privilege for me.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>I look at the interviews that we've done across the years, that that for me has been one of the biggest benefits of being able to learn from my guests, so thanks for sharing.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Today we're talking to Ms Jessye Lapenn who is Chargé D'affaires at the United States Mission in South Africa. We would love to receive your comments on Twitter: @WomanityTalk.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>In the previous segment of the conversation we spoke about Ms Lapenn's role as representing the face of America in South Africa, some of the work that she does, the force of employees that she leads in the country; 1200 strong across Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria. We spoke about some of the programmes that are on offer, particularly the youth outreach programmes from Regional Leadership</p>

	Centre run out of UNISA to the Young....
MS LAPENN	...Young African Leadership Initiative (the YALI's)...
DR. MALKA	..to the Young African Leadership Initiative (the YALI'S) who they are affectionately known as and importantly what these leadership programmes do for these youth when they come back into their respective markets. We are coming towards the latter part of the show and one important question for me is that on the 8 th March is International Women's day, where women celebrate the progress that's been achieved and I wondered, in your opinion, what do you think we need to build on the most to benefit women in the future?
MS LAPENN	So every year on International Women's day usually US embassies around the world will do a programme to market and for as long as I've been in a leadership position the embassy's always had to shift and not celebrate International Women's day because it's also my son's birthday and what I find is that when I explain that that's my scheduling challenge for an important work event, everybody immediately nods their head and says that yes, of course, because you've got a lot on your plate. You've got work on your plate and you've got family on your plate and you've got to pull them all together and maybe in a way that is the answer to your question, right, which is how do we support women to be all things and to be all that they want to be and I think there's two pieces, right, one is empowerment and tools and enabling and supporting and then the other is of course, bringing men into that equation, right, so that family responsibilities don't belong to women only, they belong equally to men and to women so that men have a chance to love and nurture children and women have all of the chances that they need, desire, deserve to love and nurture their professionals selves. And so for me, International Women's day has this really interesting character to it where it is a reminder for me of who I am most fully; both someone who is a diplomat, who wants to share US values around the empowerment of women in the course of my work, but also wants to be home celebrating with my son his birthday.
DR. MALKA	And that's the multi-dimensionality, I think, of being a woman; it's not boxing someone into a particular role and saying right, this is your job description, you are a mom. No, I can be a mother, I can be a working professional, I'm a sister, I'm a friend, I've got...I wear all of these hats and I manage them simultaneously. I think one of the biggest messages that I've got out of the conversation with you today has been about inclusivity as well as diversity and as we're coming towards the end of this show, one of the questions that I'd like to ask is about your personal journey. Some guests who've reached tremendous achievements in their respective fields have spoken about factors of success, incorporating things like perseverance, hard work; others have spoken about fear of failure, for instance; could you please share with us what have been some of your key drivers?
MS LAPENN	So I think in terms of drivers that I think one is around family. So I grew up in New York City and still no matter where I live, where I go, define myself as such, but I think was very lucky to have, on the one hand a mom, who was very successful and driven in non-profit management and city governance and to see that model and then to have a dad who assumed that I would succeed, never questioning it, and I think the truth is it's a lot easier to succeed if people expect you to and if you have models of what success looks like. We know from...we talked earlier about DREAMS about youth engagement and support and I think those lessons actually connect really well with those programmes because again, if you've got models and mentors and high expectations you're a lot more likely to succeed, so I think I was really privileged in that and have I think from that base developed and you know as one does in my own way with my own theories and for me I have found

	<p>sometimes people ask the question that “but is it lonely” and I always think well what are you talking about, I never make a decision by myself, that I always bring in senior staff to advise or challenge or engage and so for me a lot of successes then come from thinking of myself as part of a larger team so it gets that...the value of inclusivity you are referencing. I think it’s unrealistic of one to think of oneself yes, I’m going to do it all on my own, it’s not; it’s an impossible challenge than one has set. Even if your summiting Everest, you’re not doing it alone, there’s still a team that is summiting with you and supporting you and so my then theory of leadership is very much about so who’s on my team, who has skills that I don’t have, who knows things that I don’t know, who’s better than me at something or other and how do I pull those together to enable us to succeed, which in this case, right, if I say what does success look like, it looks like supporting the relationship between the US and South Africa. So finding common goals, finding common values, ways of working together and pulling the people and the countries that much closer together.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>That for me is one of the most important aspects on applying a team ethos, that when you’re working with people, that if you aren’t using people’s skills then they don’t feel validated and it isn’t the case of having a one person show.</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>Absolutely.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Now as we close out the conversation, could you please share a few words of wisdom or inspiration that you’d like to pass on to young ladies that are listening to us on the continent?</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>So we talked a lot about HIV so I wouldn’t want to miss out on the opportunity to underscore that for young women, which is to be aware of risk and to keep themselves safe and to know their status and if they’re HIV positive to stay on their meds. Because we talked about HIV so much I wouldn’t want to not leave that message but another broader message I would say is I think all of us seek inspiration. All of us are looking to be inspired and it seems to me that’s a pretty great journey to be on but while one is thinking about being inspired, one shouldn’t forget that one is also inspiring and I find this in my engagement with, for example, the DREAMS ambassadors, these young women who, I think when we set up programmes and visits where I go meet with them, maybe the team thinks I’m going to somehow inspire them because I’ve got a title in front of my name and a job I’ve worked hard to get, but that inspiration in my experience, goes two ways; that I leave as inspired by them as hopefully they are by me and I say that because I see them working hard to be their full selves, to overcome challenging circumstances and to do better than those before them or to do better for their community and so for me that’s inspiring and so for me I think that would be the message, which is, remember that you inspire someone while you are also seeking to be inspired</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>What a great message; thank you. It’s been a pleasure having you on our show today and we wish you every success as you continue with the hard work that you’re doing and the meaningful contributions that you’re making across the continent.</p>
MS LAPENN	<p>Wonderful, thank you so much, such a pleasure being with you.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>PROGRAMME END</p>