

UNESCO RIELA: The sounds of integration

Episode 87: We Care (08/04/2026)

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Esa Aldegheri

هه آل وس هأل ـأ، benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society, and identity.

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Esa Aldegheri

Hi, my name is Esa Aldegeri. I am a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow and a Research Associate at the UNESCO RIELA Chair. This episode is a recording of a presentation that I gladly chaired at the brilliant online UNESCO RIELA Spring School:” The Arts of Integrating, which took place in November 2025. So this presentation arrives from the world of caring for people in Colombia who are elderly or elders, and the three presenters are Diana Agómez, Luisa Machacón and Isabella Corvino. And they are going to be sharing reflections and thoughts on how the rituals of deep care for elderly people, as they are practiced specifically in Colombia, these caring rituals are more than just the mechanical caring for physical needs. They are sharing history, strengthening ties and deepening practices where care is reciprocal in the context of the situation in Colombia and looking at how such intimate moments of reciprocal care contribute very much to the ongoing peace process and the importance of transmitting memory from generation to generation. So the question underpinning this presentation and the project is what do these moments of reciprocal vulnerability and care and tenderness tell us about actually who is caring for whom here. And I can't wait to hear more about this. I know we've all had experiences with people who we love who are elderly and differing experiences of care in their direction. So briefly briefly about our three presenters, Diana Agómez is a Colombian Venezuelan writer and poet. She has a degree in linguistics and literature and a PhD, Candidacy and Education at Madrid's Universidad Nacional d'Education a Distancia, and she's based in Rome, which is just very cool. She is the author of *Mi cuerpo un lugar feliz*, and that won the Linguamadre Prize in 2022 in Italy. Diana's work *Mi madre encendió un volcán ella sola* was also recognized with the Vicente Núñez Poetry Prize in Spain in 2024, so many congratulations Diana for all these accolades. She's a teacher and a translator and explores the narrative of the female body in old age through this project, which is both

photographic and poetic. And together with Diana, we have Luisa Machacón, who's also a writer and a photographer based in Amsterdam. She has an MA in Latin American studies and her work explores themes of peacebuilding, as we've talked about in the context of Colombia and beyond, memory, nature and femininity. She's also a poet, the author of a collection called *No guardamos las semillas*, we didn't keep to ourselves the seeds, we didn't hoard the seeds. And she has developed interdisciplinary projects like *Before the Farewells to Arms*, which looks at through photography, the daily lives of former combatants in Colombian transition zone, as well as *We Care*, which we've already heard about a little bit, and we're about to hear a lot more about. And then to complete the wonderful triad of presenters who are going to start today is Isabella Corvino, who is a teacher of a lecture of sociology at Università di Perugia in Italy. Her PhD is from the University of Bologna, and she started her career as a researcher of International Cooperation and Development Studies. For 10 years, Isabella has carried out research on recognition, otherness, belonging and gender, specifically from a sociological perspective.

Diana Agámez

[translated from Spanish] It's very emotional, very grateful for this moment, for this passion, for that Luisa is here to help me. It's very important to share with you this work with a group of people and with Universita. I hope that we will be able to do this, because we are not only here to share our project. So thank you for having me here. I'm very excited and full of emotions about sharing this work, and I'm really looking forward to sharing with all of you the project *We Care*. *We Care* is a personal document of my family, and I'm very happy to have my family with me, Francesca Flores. A woman who lived with us not only in the old days. *We Care* was born from my personal story and my personal need to document the story of my grandmother, Francesca Flores, who lived until she was 98. Francesca, what do you think about the work that you do? I think that Francesca taught me about half of everything I know. And I think that this photograph is a personal memory of my family. For me, it's my first and most important moment of my life, Luisa, which is a photograph of her. I don't know what it is, but I really think that it's my first and most important moment. This project really was born from my personal fear of losing these intimate, important family memories. And so then one day I contacted my *compañero de aventuras*...

Esa Aldegheri

Did you call her *compañero de aventuras*?

Diana Agámez

Yeah, my companion.

Esa Aldegheri

Brilliant.

Diana Agámez

[translated from Spanish] Yeah, like my companion of adventure, my quest companion, Louisa Machacón, who is a wonderful extraordinary photographer, to take photographs that were part of my personal family photo album. But when we're looking at the photos, when we're learning about the process, I think that Francesca Flores is participating in the creation of this project, he has created a text, he has created a photo that he has posted. And then we have a question that I have about my family memory, which is that it is a photo of a photo of an education that is important to international relations. It is a very familiar story. It is important that we create, to present, to recognize and visualize the civil rights of the people who have a transmission of information. I think that we have to remember that with family memory. And that we have to know how we can do it, how we can share the story of the community. So as we got further and further into this project, as we kind of went into it deeply together, including my grandmother Francesca Flores, because she participated in the project, she was reading what we were writing, she was looking at the photos and deciding which ones she preferred. And as all this project developed, and we went into it further and further together, then I realized one important thing that it was not only about my personal family memory, so it was not only going to be a personal family photo book of our family's memory, but also this process was really importantly more like an evocation and a remembering, a process of making visible memory and shared traditions and shared understandings that were going beyond just one person's family, but touching on our community and more widely could touch on people's communities in their immediate district. And then why not also in their nation and more broadly beyond. This is for a part of the term. And for the other one, because of the impact of the naturalization of the community, at this moment, we don't have any time, we can't have a space of expression, so the honor of the world. And this is how we are going to make these photos and this process of describing a story that is so familiar to us, that we are going to have a very important story, a political story, that the generation of the female, of the female, of the female, So, therefore if we have all of these possibilities, it is one in one way or another, and conservatives, we are trying to foreign ourselves to find them. I think it is a very popular project in the United States and in Colombia, but it is something that we have to look forward to, and we have to look at the dimensions of the world. For example, the transmission of the memory, and for the introduction of our own. We have to find our own families, like us, like us, like us, like us, like us, like me, like you. So, on one hand what I said before was important about not just the family album, but more widely connecting to memory and community, and I'm going to stop soon, but also what was really important was the real natural way in which my grandmother, Francisca Flores, who then was 95 years of age, the really natural way in which she took part in the narrating of her own body. So, in a sense the self-honouring of her own body, which was an old body. And then this other hand, the project was very much about a feminist narrative of looking at the female body,

specifically our female bodies, when there are old bodies, and looking at them as bodies who are alive. My grandmother was doing this self-honouring through this project of her body, which was an old body, but was a living, alive, lively, full of life, body, vivo. And this was fundamental, it was really important to look at old bodies not through lenses that are pathologising, or clinical, or therapeutic, or looking at them as sites of infirmity, of illness, of unwellness. And this project took part in a neighbourhood that was very popular, so very not posh, I don't know. Yeah, yeah, it's like... "*aria popular*", it's like not fancy. It's like the regular neighbourhood in Cartagena, you know, it's like the rawness of the city, sort of. Yes, Cartagena in Colombia, and that's where this project took place. But more widely, we think that it's very important, as we were saying, for the strand, you know, the theme of memory, but also this sense of feminist gaze on bodies that are ageing and old, but vivo, alive and living.

Luisa Machacón

Okay, maybe I can continue now. I really like how Diana has explained this, because this definitely has been a process for years, and it has been a community process, not only like the photographer of the person, the people that have been photographed, but it is something that has been like evolving since the moment we took the pictures. But now we are going to start focusing in photography as a tool to preserve memory in political contexts, the difficult political context of conflict, Lansing conflict, or in violent conflict. As we know, in Colombia, we had 50 years in internal conflict, which ended in 2016-17. Of course, we have all been part of this conflict directly or indirectly. So we started thinking about how the body also can be an instrument of activism, how can bodies show what actually had happened. And when we took the pictures, we did not really think the release area, but because it is photography, photography is a tool that can preserve memory in different ways. It is also a tool that is easier to share what is happening than maybe through writing or through a verbal process that you're telling stories. Because when you're living in this conflict context, the trauma is sometimes so big that you cannot share the thing so easily. So photography can be a way to show the world what is happening and also to process what's happening. And everybody is going to start understanding also according to what they are living in their own lives. So when we did these pictures, actually it took me around a year to really start understanding what was happening. Because we took the pictures, and as Diana said, these are pictures from my private album. We did not think this is something that we are going to show to the world because they are also really intimate pictures of a grandmother and a granddaughter in the shower. But then I started looking at them, looking at them, looking at them, and I made a selection and sent it to Diana. And I started talking also to people that have this project, but I really do not get it yet where we are going, where we're going for. And we start seeing that, OK, we have the process of care. Somebody is taking care of each other. And these are processes that are not only directional. You are learning from each other. Who is taking care of who? The grandmother from Diana took care of

her, and now Diana is taking care of her. And in that process, you also have certain conversations that are going back and forward. And so you are sharing what has happened in your life, what happened in your context, what happened in your neighborhood. And maybe we do not suffer the type of violence that was happening in the rural areas, but also in the neighborhoods, in such a rural neighborhood like the ones Diana and I were born. You also experience certain type of violence, such as familial autism. And it's really interesting because we see the images and they are like showering, they are in the shower and there is water flowing. And I also had a really personal experience with showering. Water can be something that lets your mind process come through and flow like the water. If you actually when you're showering, when you're getting dressed, if you do these automatic things, you do it consciously. So that means that you let your unconscious come through. A lot of experience starts flowing. So in that moment of care with Diana and her grandmother, showering, it was so intimate because the different conversations start flowing. How did the grandmother from Diana bear her children? The body, the experiences, the neighborhood, all these conversations start flowing. And when I was showering, a lot of memories of vigilantism in my neighborhood also start flowing because it is like the water lets your thoughts also flow in the same way that water flows. So this was really interesting that I said, okay, yeah, but it's also not the conversations between them. It is also like the way unconscious come through the images and what you can make of the images yourself. So what we also see here, and this, we have the pictures. So it is not only a conversation of the photographer with the people that are being photographed. It is not the conversation between them too, but it's also a third conversation when people see the images, what do they do with them? What do they understand? And these pictures, we are showing images of a body, a body that has told stories. We are making the body as an instrument of activism to say, okay, we are taking care of each other. We live in this environment that maybe is not the best, but still we take care of each other. We take care of our community in countries like Colombia. We don't have a health system that takes care of the elderly. We have to do it ourselves. It's a community thing. It's a family thing. There's a huge difference in countries such as the Netherlands. This is like we have a really good health system, but still the elderly are alone. There is a huge shortage in people who take care of the elderly. So the elderly are not well taken care of. I'm not like romanticizing authority, but we can learn a little bit from each other. There is a huge, huge, huge problem now in the Netherlands. Now I'm bringing back the pictures from Colombia and putting them back in another context that is the Netherlands. And here in the Netherlands, we have the phycizing, just like the aging problem. In 20,000, 40, one or four people are going to be elderly. And who is going to take care of us? The system is already collapsing here. So we have a huge problem. So how can we understand how we can take care of each other in a better way? So this is like what I have found through these images. It is not only that we can put them in the context of Colombia or in the

context of Italy. We can translate that to everywhere in the world because here is something that is universal. So basically that. So we use the body as an instrument to communicate the issues that we have in our community, to communicate about how we can use tenderness still to show care in broad environments and environments that are being in conflict. And that's like the message that we want to bring today.

Isabella Corvino

Okay. So in the sociology, it's scientific. In this kind of poetry, a little down and just to talk about the aim of this project. As I said, it's a mix of heaviness and hope and reciprocal attention. That is the most important part that we wanted to underline because the body is the first sociological object that we can look at. It is full of histories. It has so many things to say to us to show us the future and the past at the same moment. So meeting the body, the image of the body makes us realize our place in the world. We are talking about memory and the fact that we have a personal and community history. We are part of the nation and we are to talk to think about the policy about these living bodies that are still part of this world. They're not a burden. They're people, still people, and they really deserve to live their life. We are at the same time talking about migration in an aging society and the perception of elderly people. So if we talk about with the words of Pasta Lan, the Lost Continuum Model, people view aging as a progressive series of losses. They reduce one's social participation. So we are pushing these people out of the society. We are enclosing them in their houses or caring houses in which they became silent and they experienced solitude. They feel the loneliness. They have fewer content as their body becomes weaker than before. So they speak less. They can't hear their voice. Sometimes they can spend their days without talking with anybody. And they feel their burden for the rest of the family and the community too, as they are felt like just an expense in a family that maybe is not living in a fancy quarter. So it's feeling the time as a time and money cost. And it brings a lot of effort, a lot of stressful moments as our minds begin not to be so sharp and focused. So maybe we need more time to communicate or maybe we can repeat the same thing so many times. And if you are very, very lucky, like Diana was, she can hear beautiful histories about their family and keep the memory in their future. But to stay on the point, the impact on the family is very harsh. The government expenses for elderly people is not sufficient. And the greatest part of the work is on women. We cannot hide it. The greatest part of the caring system is hidden by women. And when a woman has to live his country and just live her life as a double burden, the one trying to find her way out and experiencing her best life and the other one to lose people and moments and precious moments and so many histories. So when we are trying to measure the care roles and responsibilities, we feel that this is urgent to shed more light on the important characteristics, on care roles and responsibility of men and women. Because we know that elderly are not people just to be thrown out of our houses, but they have so much love to share. And maybe their love is more important for men than for women, because

when we talk about taking care of elderly, we feel that is something that is left to people that are patient, that are very solid, but can just do that, cannot focus on something more ambitious. And it's not something that is very healthy to be teach to our future generations. As they can feel, women can be just inside the houses taking care, cleaning, chatting and having coffee. That is a wonderful thing, but we have to keep in mind that every human being is a very precious treasure and we have to cheer this situation. It is important to establish who provides care to our aging population in order to better understand the consequences of caregiving, how best to assist caregivers. As we always can experience the stressful condition of caregivers, as they are not dealing with babies, so they are so tired, but they are so happy because one day the children will be happy and grown up and self-sufficient, will be facing so many adventures. The perspective of caregivers is very sad because we are maybe pressuring some moment, that will be the last one, not maybe the happiest. So this kind of burden of heaviness that as I was talking about is something very concrete that we can feel. And sometimes caregivers start having insomnia, pains and so many problems they cannot even talk about, because it will be felt like they are just fed up with their position in the family. And more than these, we have too many social perceptions of elderly. So we have two main pictures. We have a Scrooge when we talk about the elderly or we have the winner one, the Golden Age. When we talk about the stereotype, the negative one, links this kind of persons to the severely impaired, slow thinking, hopeless, lonely, ill-tempered or too quiet and naive. Or on the upside, we can have a positive stereotyped like John Wayne, so Golden Ageing, active, independent, happy, loving, supportive. But our world is more complex than this. So even our communication on this part of our life is not fair because even elderly feel they're wrong. They are not doing things like they should be more supportive to their nephew, to their children, to the society, not to be a burden, just to repay the expense they are making and they are causing. So when we talk about this kind of experience, we have to keep in mind that a simple photo like Diana St. Louisa can really push our imagination further. We have to start focusing on the future scenarios we'll be facing in a few years. Europe is aging like the old world round, even Africa and South America, China. We are always fewer and we are always giving birth later in life. So our children will be taking care of us at a very early age. It will be something that's very sad because they will be facing their future or our care.

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Esa Aldegheri

شكراً, grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for شكراً more information about our work, please visit bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA.

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