

Module 3: Interview with Kirsten Chick

[00:00:12] Hi, welcome to our first Q&A for Module three. I'm really excited to be joined by Kristen Chick, who's a freelance journalist and focusing on gender, conflict and migration. Her work has been published in The Washington Post, The L.A. Times, Time, The New Republic and elsewhere. More specifically, we've invited Kristin for a conversation with us after twenty eight investigations of sexual abuse in photojournalism for the Columbia Journalism Review, which created enormous impact across the journalism industry and opened way for more conversations about harassment within not just photography but in the media communities wide. So, she's also an of my fellow and has agreed to join us to talk a little bit more about this article, but also about the effects that it had. So, thank you, Kristen, for coming along. Very happy to have you. And I guess I just wanted to really start off to sort of talk a little bit more about the reason why you made this article and how you put together it was and our students will have read this as it's in the sort of pre reading materials. But really nice to hear in your own words why you why you put this article together.

[00:01:35] Yeah, well, I started working on that article in January or February, I think, of twenty eighteen, so it was not too long after the me-too movement had started and I had had been having so many conversations with friends and colleagues, particularly who were photojournalist's, about how widespread this issue of harassment and abuse was, particularly in photojournalism. So, it was something that had been really on my mind and that I'd been having a lot of conversations about. And then an editor, a great editor who was at the Columbia Journalism Review at the time, just and commissioned me to write the story. And initially we had seen it as a shorter piece than what it turned out to be

[00:02:27] and probably a more general and less specific piece just about how bad the problem was in photojournalism. And as I started interviewing people for the story, it became very clear that people were ready, really ready to speak out, to go on the record in some cases, in many cases, to name the people who had abused them. So, it became clear that that there was just a real opening for an in-depth investigation. And so, I pursued that and came out with something much longer and more in depth than I initially thought would be possible.

[00:03:09] And how did you in some ways when we talk about investigative journalism, that can be a lot of consideration, safety, consideration about speaking to sources, people speaking on the record, off the record. And was there any sort of safety concerns that you had in putting this article together at that sort of sort of stage?

[00:03:36] You know, a lot of times the safety concerns I have in terms of speaking with sources are more about I'm often dealing with sources like in Egypt or somewhere where there's a hostile government that could pose a risk. So, this was this was quite different. But, you know, the way that I dealt with speaking with sources for this for this article was to put their interests first. And so, you know, I did not pressure people to go on the record. I made it clear that people should do what was best for them. And I when I'm interviewing and reporting on issues of abuse. I'm very I'm very cognizant of what people are putting on the line in order to talk to me and the and the toll that it can take for them. And so, I just tried to be as sensitive as I could and as take a soft approach as I could and made it very clear that in some cases people spoke to me first off, the record and then decided to go on the record. And I'd just try to make sure that people were doing what was best for them and not feeling pressured to do something that would end up hurting them in the long run.

[00:05:01] And it's really important when we talk about safety, to talk about our emotional well-being as well and the sort of psychological safety side of not just being in a difficult environment, but also being exposed to like reliving trauma and speaking about stories that have personally happened to us and how we hold out as journalists and even as safety advisors to make sure this like that emotional safety in place. It was a really groundbreaking piece which did send shockwaves across the industry and is a great example of the power of uniting voices together to call out abuse within the media and on the back of the me-too movement. Could you just tell us about what some of the impact has been from this article being released?

[00:05:50] Yeah, I was I was really happy to see that it did have some impact on some of the institutions cited in the piece, took action to try to address the culture of impunity to abuse and harassment that had been pervasive in those places. So, for example, the Eddie Adams workshop was one of the institutions that I reported on is having that kind of permissive culture. And they took quite a few actions. I think they developed a code of conduct or maybe strengthened it if they had already had one. They developed. And this is what I think is really important, a system for reporting abuse that could be done anonymously if people wanted to. And they talked about it at the beginning of the of the week, I think tried to make it clear that people should feel comfortable to report abuse if they wanted to, and that abuse would not be tolerated. And so, I heard from some people that that had created a different kind of environment there. So, there were institutions that took action. Some institutions, you know, for example, I wrote about this photographer, Christian Rodriguez, who a number of women said had behaved abusively and inappropriately toward them. You know, some publications stopped commissioning him. That's a pretty easy step to take. It's not that doesn't require a lot of sacrifice from them. You know, there was also the photographer who was accused by and multiple women of misconduct and he resigned from his agency seven. So those are kind of smaller, smaller impacts on specific people. I think more broadly, some institutions started thinking about this sort of thinking, well, maybe we should have a code of conduct. What are we going to do about these issues? Some put out statements, I think. And that wasn't just because of the article, right, but the whole me-too movement is going on and there's other organizations working, working on these issues. But I think we've seen organizations start to become more an institution and start to become more aware. But in a lot of cases, I think it's unclear whether the changes they're making are just paying lip service to this or whether they're really, truly interested in addressing it.

[00:08:23] And time will tell, I guess, as we move through into different generations of photographers, not who were much more aware of the issues and your pieces open to doorway to too many conversations within photography. That's it's been a problematic environment, particularly for women. And I think that leads me nicely onto sort of the next issue I wanted to discuss with you is what are some of the key issues when it comes to harassment that we face as cis white women because it is different to our BIPAC female colleagues or LGBTQ colleagues. So, what are some of the key issues in relation to being CIS white women that you think still need more visibility because the work is never done right? We're still we're still working through a lot, but also as allies to put women on LGBTQ colleagues. Where can we where can we make space or find a place to be able to support people? Because harassment affects so many different identities within photography. It isn't just about six white women. So, yeah, I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

[00:09:45] Yeah, well, some of the some of the backlash to that article and some of the other articles I've written just made it pretty clear to me that I think in journalism we still consider plagiarism and manipulation of photos as probably a more serious issue than

abuse and harassment and or we take it more seriously, like if there's no questions when people are fired or held accountable for, you know, for that kind of behavior. And yet when people are held accountable for abuse of people, there's sometimes a backlash of that kind of illustrated to me just how much work we have left to do. And, you know, I also noticed somewhat of a. Of a generational divide and in some cases, some of the older, older people in our industry are less interested in confronting this problem, less interested in accountability. But I think as this white woman, I think that we need to really avoid centering ourselves, which is often what we do when these issues arise and taking up all the air and all the space and all of the attention. And, you know, we need to really make sure that we don't center ourselves, that we're that we are using our privilege to advocate for others, our relative privilege. And I find and you mentioned this earlier, find often in my reporting that people think they're the only ones who suffered from this kind of abuse. And when they finally realize there are others and then they can sometimes band together, they find a lot of support in that. And often it's more successful in terms of bringing accountability. So even just speaking up and having these conversations when we can, because we might be in a position where it's easier to do that or where there's fewer repercussions to do that, because the more as we all know, the more marginalized people are, the more vulnerable both they can be to abuse them, the less able they might be to speak up, to be able to speak up about it. So, I think making sure as well to really support our colleagues who are people of color, LGBTQ, when they speak up, is critically important as well.

[00:12:24] Yes, agreed, I think all the issues that we face is as if you are perceived as being more feminine, you ought to mathematically fall under the potential harm of the patriarchy and all of that that comes with it. So, I think it's important to be really cognizant of those issues that are black friends will face, you know, Akwei friends will face in this industry because it's sometimes we experience safety in different ways based on our identity. And I think it's it would be nice to sort of know because you've got this huge awareness of the issue and you've been reporting on it. Are there any measures that you've used that you feel OK to share around this subject? Around harassment is the things that you've put in place now because of that, you may have had your own experiences, but also now aware of the experiences of others. From a safety perspective, are there sort of some tips, some tips or measures that you can share with us?

[00:13:33] Yeah, I mean, I think the biggest thing that I've sort of realized through doing this reporting and I've continued reporting on this issue specifically in the years since, that story, too, is just... The number of people who've experienced it and the power that there is in numbers and so I think I'm more likely to talk about issues that I face with colleagues, harassment and abuse. Because I found that often there's you know, there's more than one person who's experienced that, you know, particularly at the hands of one perpetrator. Right? But either way, it's been you know, it's been really interesting to see the way that others band together and the support they find in groups. And I've experienced that myself as well. So, and there are great organizations like the IWMF that have fostered that kind of community and support. But, you know, and I've experienced sexual violence in the field as well. And I think that I wouldn't have gotten through the aftermath of that without the support of colleagues. And I often rely on the support of colleagues to stay safe as well. So, I found it so helpful to have this community of journalists where we can talk about these issues and brainstorm and find support from each other. I think that's been really helpful for me.

[00:15:10] Yeah, that's and it's encouraging to hear that there's a peer support network now that exists for people who've experienced abuse and harassment and sexual violence

and to open the lid on so many undiscussed issues and certainly make safe spaces for people to disclose as well, because obviously there's some cases of sexual violence that go back decades were unreported at the time because there was just no space for it. So, this whole generations of journalists coming forward and saying, I've been experiencing this like my whole career and it's been normalized in the newsroom environment, environment. This is something I really wanted to ask you is about what can editors, people who work in newsrooms who are kind of in a position of resource due to ally to women on combined with people who experience harassment because they're in a position as line managers or people who are potentially holding on to someone's risk assessment, on the ground reporting. And I think is a question we get asked a lot like, what can I do if I'm in a position of power, if somebody I'm close to experiences harassment. So, have you got any advice?

[00:16:26] Yeah, well, I think there's I would break that into two parts. One is it's so important for institutions to take this seriously and to do something about it. And, you know, the sort of lip service, here's our code of conduct, but not never doing anything about enforcing it and never asking anyone about. That's just clearly not enough. And it's not a good faith effort to address this. So, institutions, newspapers, photo agencies, all of the institutions in our industry, they need to get serious about this. And that means, you know, that means bringing it up and developing systems that are trusted for dealing with it. So, this needs to be spoken about. They need to speak about it and they need to develop a way and publicize a way that people can report instances of abuse and then they need to take it seriously and act when they when they discover it and. You know, I think particularly the issue of creating a system for reporting is something that makes a big difference because a lot of people I talked to in my reporting, they don't know who to go to or how to do it if they want to report abuse. And they're also not sure that if they do report abuse, will that affect my career as this editor going to see me as a troublemaker and never hire me again? All of that that we all have experience and know, right. So, creating a system and maybe a system in which your anonymity could be protected if you aren't creating that kind of system before you're at a crisis. And making it known and putting it out there, I think is that with a good intention to deal with these things seriously and. And, you know, holistically, I think that's really important for institutions and for now for editors who maybe aren't in a position of like changing these policies or implementing that kind of thing. I think talking about it with the with the people who work for you is really important. Just as you've mentioned, you know, normalization of this kind of behavior just normalized in our industry. And when you never bring it up as an editor, you're contributing to that. You know, the people who work for you are not in a position of power. They are not it is not comfortable for them to bring these things up. So, I think for editors to ask the people they work with if they're safe. Have you experienced any harassment? Is there one of you is there something I need to know about? What would make you feel comfortable? What do you need? You need support raising and having these conversations with the intention of, you know, seriously acting to support people and dealing with issues that you find is, I think, important. And I would love to hear that more from the editors I work with. You know, are you are you experiencing harassment? Are you safe? What do you mean? How can we support you? That would that would be helpful and important, I think.

[00:19:54] To offer that reassurance. And I was thinking, as you were speaking, that about the eight aid workers that I've worked with in the past and we've had this conversation and they most of the organizations have an anonymous phone line now, which is run by its kind of outsourced, but it's an it's a way for you to go around perhaps the management to be able to report something, because often the harassment happens in the newsroom. But with aid organizations, they're are very aware of this. So, they have this anonymous phone

line to raise issues. And I think it's the fear of losing work and especially as journalist, that is sometimes this huge barrier to not reporting it. So, I think having very clear pathways to report and also feeling safe to do so. Unsupported is like fundamental really in the way we move ahead with this, because I feel like over time that's going to be more people disclosing. Yeah, you're right. There's no. There's no solidarity and silence, really, it is more in raising your voice and I talk about situational awareness and using your voice. This is exactly the same, you know, so you know and I know I know with your work, you share a lot a lot of reporting that relates directly to you as well. And your own experience with sexual violence and your own survivor story. And I just wonder if there's some sort of self-care strategies that you have for this, because I think also the way we talk about the sort of prevention, mitigation, how to make your hotel room safe, how to you know, how to be situationally aware and create that circle of safety when we're going about our work on the ground. But sometimes the worst can happen. And the impact of that is physical, but also emotional. So, what are some of the self-care strategies that you've put in place that you feel comfortable to share with us here?

[00:22:11] A big one is therapy, and I'm grateful that I'm in a position to have access to that, and I'm also grateful for the organizations that are working to expand access to that. So, therapy has been really helpful for me as a you know, as a journalist who has experienced sexual violence, writing on sexual violence a lot. And it's been it's been really helpful. You know, having the support of the community, of colleagues, as I mentioned before, has also been really, really helpful. And that's, you know, as I mentioned, an environment that's been fostered by organizations working to bring. To bring women and non-binary journalists together, and that's been really helpful for me, you know, it can be it can be hard. I've sort of become a person to whom a lot of people, especially in photojournalism, come to talk to. You know, they bring me their stories, which I'm really grateful for. It's also it's also a lot to carry and it can be a little bit overwhelming. But you know. Therapy has been helpful and learning how to deal with that, relying on the support of others and remembering, of course, that for all of us in this, it's not none of us can change everything and we do what we can do. But. I'm grateful to be able to have support dealing with that, so.

[00:23:58] And that's really encouraging to hear that you have some a support crew, as I say, in place, you know, like a support mechanism. And what about like day-to-day JOIDES? What sort of moments to put into your day to bring you a bit of like light relief? What you're going to go to thing?

[00:24:17] I'm I have a dog, and so I'm big on I'm taking her for a walk and getting outside. And so that's always, always really helpful. A lot of, you know, days of heavy interviews and heavy subject matter just getting outside in the fresh air and, you know, cuddling with my dog because that's always really helpful.

[00:24:37] I can completely relate. And so, finally, last question. Where do you personally feel most safe?

[00:24:47] I feel most safe at home, and that's something I'm very grateful for.

[00:24:54] Thank you so much, Kristen, for taking the time to chat to us. We're really honored to have you doing this work on behalf of all of us. So, and thanks for having the courage to put yourself out there as someone with lived experience of sexual violence and also working on this subject. And we appreciate you have a big load to lift. But, you know,

it's without your stories and the work that you do, it would be much harder for people to talk about it and to change things. So, yeah. Thank you so much for joining us.

[00:25:27] It's my pleasure. Thank you for having me.