



**Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus**

Episode 3: Caitlin Figueiredo on The Importance of Emerging Leadership

**Hosted by: Shadé Zahrai
Interviewee: Caitlin Figueiredo**

Featuring: Jinny Olney, Head of Women in Focus, CommBank

In this episode Shadé Zahrai interviews Caitlin Figueiredo, Founder and CEO of Jasiri Australia. She is also an Australian Youth Development Index Expert Panelist of the Ministry of Youth and Sport, Board Member and Vice Chair of Australian Youth Affairs Coalition and Ambassador of Alannah and Madeline Foundation.

Jinny [00:00:03] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources you need to activate your leadership. I'm Jinny Olney, Head of CommBank's Women in Focus. And Leading Women is just one of the ways we support women at all stages of their business journey. So no matter where you are on your journey, we are here. Enjoy this episode as we redefine the business landscape together.

Shadé [00:00:32] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and elevate equality. I'm your host Shadé Zahrai, and it's such a pleasure to have a rich and valuable conversation today with Caitlin Figueiredo, founder and CEO of Jasiri Australia. In her relatively short career, Caitlin has made incredible inroads for a generation of women who may not have stepped up and spoken out. Caitlin shares how women leadership is the key to shaping our democracy, the power of the collective and her magical moment with Meghan, yes, Duchess of Sussex that will inspire us all in our leadership. A very warm welcome to Leading Women, Caitlin, thanks for dialing in from Canberra.

Caitlin [00:01:23] Thank you so much for having me here again. I really appreciate it.

Shadé [00:01:26] I can't wait to dive into some of your insights and stories. Now, you have an incredible experience of leadership and you are so young and it's incredible to see such an outstanding young woman doing amazing things. Can you share with us the story of your unique leadership journey?

Caitlin [00:01:40] I think it's really interesting that everyone always says, you know, I'm so young and I have got this leadership journey and I really appreciate you saying that but how I sort of feel about leaders is that leadership is not defined by age. And so, yes, I started pretty young, and that was mainly because I had my grandparents, my Avo and Avozinha and my father and my mother teaching from a young age that leadership and supporting your community has to start from the time that you're young. So it's always been very natural, I would say and so my family is an inspiration to me, they are Indian, but they came from Kenya. So when they came to Australia, they came to WA, this is about a couple of years after the White Australia policy ended and they found it really difficult in the beginning to sort of fit in. And, you know, they face cultural prejudice, racial discrimination and when I was little, what they learnt is the whole part of you is to give back to your community, to serve your community and to leave where you live better than you found it. And that's because, you know, they came from another country. They've seen how different people live. And they wanted to really tell me and show me how privileged I am to be able to grow up in Australia. And so that's what essentially I did. I started growing up and I had lived experience with domestic violence, and the whole time I kept on thinking there has to be something more. There has to be a way that we can help other people because my story is not unique. My story is a story of women from all across the world experiencing domestic violence. And I wanted to do something about it. So when I was about 19 years old, I went to university and I said, you know what? I'm going to try and do something. I reached out to a couple of organisations and World Vision and they gave me an opportunity with no leadership experience. They said, you know what, we're going to take a chance on you and we're going to give you an opportunity to found our youth organisation in the ACT and essentially that's what I did. I had absolutely no clue what I was doing. Google was my best friend and I just went from there and I stumbled and fell. But I fell upwards; I like to say, because from there I got to go to the UN. I got to go to the White House. I got to found my own organisation and do all these incredible unique experiences whilst at the same time remembering where I came from and remembering my grandparents and my parents' memory and message of always serve others before yourself.

Shadé [00:04:10] What a beautiful insight or underlying purpose to have that is so deeply connected to who you are because it's your family, it's where you've come from and I actually I just want to highlight, I love how you mentioned the piece around age because it's very much a limit, isn't it? Sometimes we think, oh, well, I can't do that because I'm not ready or I'm not the right age yet. We place these limitations on ourselves and these obstacles but to your point, you were young. You took an opportunity. I love how you said you failed, but you failed upwards and that's what it's about. It's about learning. It's about growth. So, Caitlin, what is your main program, Girls Takeover Parliament, offer young women and how has this been effective?

Caitlin [00:04:49] So our program, Jasiri Australia, we run Girls Takeover Parliament and essentially it's an experiential education initiative to create pathways to politics for young women both across Australia and around the world. We all know that women are dramatically underrepresented in Parliament but it's not just women; it's also people with disabilities. In the Australian Federal Parliament, for example, there are only 1% of parliamentarians who identify with having a disability in comparison to 18% of the population. At the current rate, we're going to have eight election cycles before we reach gender equality. You are looking throughout COVID, majority of our leaders are the people making decisions have been men. There are data to show that by the time the pandemic is over and we start going back to life as normal, girls around the world because of lack of education or lack of being in the boardrooms, being in decision-making powers, they are actually going to be a generation behind then when we first entered the pandemic and that is a really scary thought. So this is the whole purpose of Girls Takeover Parliament, it is to open the closed doors to young women everywhere so that they can be shapers of our democracy, so that they can see that even though they're not represented, they can be and that's why we partner young women with politicians, directly. I was talking to Senator Jordan Steele-John and he said, we are the only organisation in Australia besides from university programs to actually bring young women into Parliament where they get to have work experience, where they get to write motions on issues that they care about, where after the program, after they have their voices in the chambers of Parliament, they get further opportunities. We've recently had one of our first alumni actually run for office. We have young women who work in the most senior ministerial offices in the country. We've had alumni go on to actually create similar programs in India. This is what we love to see because it's creating the next generation of politicians and how I like to say is we're creating the next generation of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern because that is my goal, to create mini Jacinda Arderns everywhere.

Shadé [00:07:08] Oh, I love that and it's so important to really help young people and especially young women who, to your point, have experienced this sort of exclusion for so long and it doesn't seem to be getting better to really empower them to realise that they can make a change too. It's not about just waiting for other things to happen. They can feel empowered to go out there and be those change makers and that's the incredible impact that your social enterprise is having. You shared such amazing outcomes how it's not even just here, it's actually having these social ripples domestically, but also overseas, creating this beautiful global community of young women who also support each other and lift each other up. So when it comes to the idea of political inclusion, how can we as young women and all young women on this journey, what can we do to choose to challenge?

Caitlin [00:07:56] I think there are a few things, but the first thing we choose to challenge is we understand that not every young woman wants to be a politician. I mean that is a really tough job and not everyone wants to do that because, I mean, why would you? I personally want to. I want to be prime minister one day, but that is a choice. So I would say as we live in democratic countries, we have seen over the last couple of months how fragile democracies are across the globe. We have to, as voters and as citizens, protect our democracies. So a way to do that is to challenge and to use your vote. If you may not want to be a politician but you can use your vote to choose politicians who you identify with. You can volunteer. You can write to political leaders and say this is the change that we want to see and hold them accountable and to recognise as young women and as voters, we have immense power. It's not often told that we do. It's often the individual is cast aside. But when an individual joins the collective that is when you create waves of change and that is something I want to show and to champion women everywhere to go, actually, you have this power. Own it. Use it and that's how you can change the world.

Shadé [00:09:14] Well, Caitlin, I actually just got goosebumps then when you were talking about creating waves of change and how the individual has the power to do this and then it becomes this collective impact. I'm still getting the goosebumps. I think it's so relevant to the theme of choose to challenge because it's about challenging stereotypes, challenging paradigms, challenging ways of thinking and even more than that, it's us challenging ourselves and challenging the self-limiting beliefs that we may have as women, whether we're early in our careers, whether we're young women, whether we're advanced, wherever we are at, it's us taking that time to think, okay, what can I do as an agent of change? How can I be empowered? One of the things that we know women experience is imposter syndrome and imposter syndrome is this sense of essentially feeling like a fraud and feeling undeserving

of previous successes and achievements even if we have a really strong track record of achievements and successes. We're not particularly good at owning that and so we have this sense of inadequacy or self-doubt. Is this something that you've experienced? Have you experienced imposter syndrome?

Caitlin [00:10:15] I've definitely experienced imposter syndrome. I still do, you know, being here on this podcast, why did you guys ask me to participate in this but I'll give you an example of a time when I really faced it. It was a couple of years ago, back in 2016 during the 100 Women of Influence. I got a phone call to say that I had made the list and I could not believe it. I screamed, I'm like, oh my God, is this real? Then when I went to the awards ceremony, I was there with my family and I was sitting there. They were about to call out the Young Leader category and all of a sudden I started to see cameras walk towards me and I turned to my brother. I'm going, okay, what's going on? What's going on here? Then they called out my name. I had just won the Young Leader category of the 100 Women of Influence in Australia. I had just turned twenty-one. I had barely done anything in my life, I thought to win and deserve this award. I remember shaking, just absolutely shaking, not having any courage or anything. I remember walking up to the stage and they handed me this award and I remember looking down into the crowd and I saw my mentor, Natasha Stott Despoja, she's the former ambassador for women and girls. I looked out to her and I'm like, okay, I'm going to use this moment to own my truth. So for the first time, very publicly, I might add, to the most influential women across the country, I told them the reason why I do what I do. The fact that when I was a little girl, someone tried to end my life because I was born a girl and this was in Australia. I felt at the time I had no right to share my story publicly because of the stigmatism but I knew I had to use this moment to overcome my imposter syndrome, to use it as a way to share my story, to reach out to other people who may feel that because of gender-based violence or gender discrimination or racial discrimination that they can overcome anything and that owning your power is truth and that is what I've been able to do since then. I look at that moment and I look back at that imposter syndrome thinking I had no right to deserve that win and I have continuously reminded myself that actually, yes, if other people recognise me, I should recognise myself.

Shadé [00:12:47] What a beautiful moment that you had where you consciously decided that I'm going to use this moment right now and own my truth and in doing so, you would have been almost giving permission for others in similar positions to do the same and just own everything that you are and the challenges that you've been through and actually reform that into a form of strength to inspire and empower others. So much humility coming through, even when you're sharing that story, Caitlin, very well deserved in terms of the incredible work that you have been doing and are still doing. It's beautiful because it ties into, again, this idea of service that you were raised with and taking these seemingly negative life experiences and transforming them into opportunities for you to do amazing things, to support and elevate others. Just really quickly, I wanted to highlight there was something you were sharing with us before when we had a chat and it was around how you didn't necessarily want the spotlight on you. You weren't necessarily comfortable with that. For you, it was more important to shift that spotlight onto the women that you're helping and supporting. Why did you feel that and how important was that for you?

Caitlin [00:13:55] [00:13:55] I think it's really important and it goes back to service and leadership. I personally feel, and especially over the last couple of years that I need to get to a space where I can help others, that the way to be able to make a change goes back to that wave analogy of I can use my power, my position and my influence to help others and to bring them along with the journey so that they can shine. For me, I want to get to a position where I can be in the back of the room. I don't have to be at the front. I don't have to always be speaking, but I can let others do that for me. What I really love is this quote from Vice President Kamala Harris saying that I may be the first, but I am not the last and that, I feel, is everything that I hope I can stand for. I hope that Jasiri and Girls Takeover Parliament can stand for that we may be the first but we are not the last. We will keep working until every single young woman everywhere has the opportunity to be the next one and the next one and the next one. [61.1s]

Shadé [00:14:57] And such a powerful legacy that you're putting in place, really elevating the role that you're playing and the role that Jasiri Australia is playing. Now, the story I would love to touch on very quickly. Again, you share this with us, and it was around you meeting the Queen and social interaction that you had with someone else. I want to make sure we cover this one, the classic story.

Caitlin [00:15:16] Yes, so, in 2018, I was named a Queen's Young Leader from Australia, and this was oh my gosh, this was most insane, unreal experience. We got to Buckingham Palace, you know, casually and we were going through Buckingham Palace. I remember walking down into the Throne Room. There's a throne, on my right hand side is David Beckham. On my left hand side is the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, just casually and all the while they are playing Coldplay on a string quartette. This is unbelievable, insane so I was sitting there and it was my turn to go up to the Queen. Again, just casually like you do as any young person and I was so nervous, again, going back to 2016 that I was so nervous. I was like who does this and I wasn't breathing, I physically wasn't breathing. There is a camera

footage of me holding my breath and so I look over to the Duchess of Sussex, and she mouthed the word breathe to me, and in that moment I took this giant breath, they called my name again. I walked up to the Queen. I received my award. We had our little moment. I got through it. I thought I made that moment up in my head. I had a private audience with Megan and she told me, hey, we had a moment, didn't we? I was like, oh, my gosh, we did have a moment. It was real. I didn't make it up and that was just life affirming for me.

Shadé [00:16:59] I love that. A good friend of the royals and a special moment with Meghan and even you know what I love about the story as well is that in the moment, all you needed was another woman to support you and say, hey, breathe, you've got this. It just happened to be the Duchess of Sussex as it is, you know, thank you for sharing that story. I think it's a brilliant one to share. Now, when we're talking about elevating equality more broadly and casting our gaze to the future, where to from here? We obviously need to be thinking, okay, well, if we want to go anywhere, we need to start tackling the things that are holding us back right here, right now. So what do you feel is the biggest element that actually holds women back?

Caitlin [00:17:38] I think, Shadé that is a really difficult question because it is different for every single woman depending on her circumstances or lived experience. I would say more broadly, it is going back to that societal expectation of ingraining and indoctrinating the idea that women have to do everything alone, that they can't seek help, that if they're not doing a million and one things whether that's being trying to be a mother, a good wife, trying to reach the corporate C-suites all at the same time, and if they're not doing it perfectly, then there's something wrong with them. So I feel like trying to remove those social stigmatism and trying to support women to understand that it's okay to ask for help, that it's okay not to be perfect. I would also say that more broadly, it's up to men and it's up to people in positions of power to go, actually, not everything has to fall on women's shoulders. If we start sharing the burden equally and we start calling it out not just on women's behalf, but on men's that's how we can start creating a more equitable world where women can succeed, where they can have more opportunities to be leaders.

Shadé [00:18:59] I love how you highlighted that because it's so important to recognise that as women are moving forward and pushing for equality, we're only half of the population and we can't do it alone. I was raised on this beautiful analogy and this quote that says that men and women are like two wings of a bird. It's only when both of these wings are equal in strength that the bird of humanity can truly soar. I love the visual that gives us because it reminds us that we can't do it by ourselves. In the same vein, we also know that not that this is the topic of this particular chat that we're having, but we know that there are stereotypes and challenges that men face as well in terms of toxic masculinity and a whole other story but it's very much about collaboration and unity and bringing it back to that. You also highlighted this piece around perfectionism and how women often have a tendency to hold back until we feel like we are doing something perfectly or we will be perfect or we know all the answers. This holds a lot of women back from speaking up in meetings, from applying for roles for potentially even moving into the realm of politics because maybe they don't feel like they know enough or they're not ready. So what would you say to every woman who is with us on this journey? What advice would you like to give to them?

Caitlin [00:20:14] I think my biggest advice to women on this journey, women who want to be on this journey but don't feel like they're ready is simple, to just do it, to just start. Don't wait until you think you have the finances or if you are at a certain age in life, if you see that you and you have the passion behind you that you want to make a difference then just do it. There are going to be people around you who will champion you. There are people out there who will help you and that once you take that step, the whole world will change because you don't know, if you are that one person, that one person like Kamala Harris, for example, you could be her. You just need to do it. Trust me, the more women that we have who put themselves out there, the more women who become leaders; the more everything will start changing for the better. After we have lived through COVID, there is not a better time to just do it.

Shadé [00:21:21] Beautiful words, now coming from that idea of just doing it, there is obviously many women will call it the down side of but what if I fail? What if I am not good enough? What if I am judged? What will others say? How would you approach that when you have someone who might be very hesitant to just do it, whatever that is for them, because they're afraid of the consequences that may come?

Caitlin [00:21:50] I think that's always really difficult. I think we shouldn't be pushing women to do things that they don't want to do but I would say that with everything in life, from the time that we're little, we live in a life of uncertainty. For example, when we were babies and we want to take our first steps, we fall over and we keep stumbling until we walk until that just becomes normal. So I would say that to any woman who feels like they would receive pressure or pushback or discrimination, it will be there but know that you are not alone and that everything

good always starts off with being a challenge but that challenge eventually becomes normalised until that normalisation becomes your everyday reality.

Shadé [00:22:43] Beautifully said, I love that the challenge will become normalised and that normalisation becomes your everyday reality and this is what we're all pushing for. This is what we all want to achieve. So, Caitlin, we know that one of your mantras is that everywhere is an opportunity. Can you tell us a little bit more about this and how you bring this to life? What does this actually mean?

Caitlin [00:23:04] Definitely, that is one of my mantras. I believe that there are infinite possibilities in life and that it's up to us to not only find that, but to use it. So I think going back to Jasiri Australia and our foundational story, I remember thinking about the presidency in America at the time and I wanted to create a program of girls taking over Parliament but I didn't know any politicians. So what I started to do was collect my ideas together and I started reaching out to political leaders but what I also did was to use a back door. So I started to find their staffers and essentially I did a LinkedIn cyberstalk to try and find out who they are so that I can reach out and go directly to them and that is how we were able to take a simple idea to now work with over 250 political leaders around the world from backbenchers all the way up to prime ministers. So what I'd like to tell young women and women everywhere is that have an idea and that if people tell you, no, just keep working until you get a yes. If you don't get that, yes, straight away, find a back door, because there is always a way to get around a problem to make what your idea is to become a reality.

Shadé [00:24:28] Beautifully said and it's so relevant for women, I've seen so many be faced with a no or be faced with a rejection or what they consider a failure and then they take that on as if they are the failure or they are the reason why something didn't work out. Then they stop acting. They just become very filled with that self-doubt. They don't want to try anymore because they've basically resigned themselves to the fact that they don't believe they can do it but to your point, what a brilliant story about leveraging social media, not taking a no as the be all and end all and just finding another way. What an amazing outcome you ended up having where it just allowed you to reach out to so many new people and so many new areas and really expand the social impact of what you're doing so beautifully highlighted in that. So Caitlin, as you know, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership and our unique impact is that each amazing gift offers a tangible tool that's ignited their leadership for us to add into our leadership toolbox. So what are you adding for us today?

Caitlin [00:25:30] I'm going to be cheeky and offer one personal and one practical. The personal is going back to the Duchess of Sussex to breathe, to live in the moment when you are on this leadership journey and to take a moment to physically breathe, to soak it all in because we can get caught on this elevator of life and not take a moment to look around at our surroundings, to really savour it at any time you need it, just breathe. I would say the second tip is about elevating and expanding impact would be if you were in a position to do so, support other women around you, go back to service, go back to community, go back to the wave, go back to change. Supporting other women like young women like myself or women of colour, women with disabilities who may not have that financial capital or may not have those influential networks and supporting them and championing them can make all of the difference to their lives. So I would really recommend, just like this podcast is doing, bringing people together, use yourself as a catalyst to support others.

Shadé [00:26:38] Beautifully said and such a beautiful way to end this conversation because that's all we have time for but thank you for such an empowering message, reminding women everywhere that we can be the change we want to see. We can create the ripples of change and we all have a part to play but it's about us really stepping into our power, taking the moments that we have available and just finding any of those doors, whether they're the front doors or the back doors and obviously supporting all of us, ourselves and each other on the journey. Thank you so much, Caitlin.

Caitlin [00:27:09] Thank you so much. I've loved this conversation.

Shadé [00:27:16] What an encouraging conversation, we're looking forward to you joining us next episode. Until then, share this episode with the women leaders you know and let's activate leadership together.

Jinny [00:27:28] Thanks for listening to Leading Women where we can all activate leadership and redefine the business landscape. So now it's over to you, access the links, tips and tools discussed in this episode at womeninfocus.com.au and subscribe to Leading Women so you don't miss an episode. Leave a review. Spread the word. And let's commit to keeping the conversation going at [#leadingwomenaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomenaus)