# Episode #05 “On Speaking Up” with Sophia Longwe

Language of Conversation: English

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**Constance:** Good morning, Darian.

**Darian:** Morning Constance.

**Constance:** Welcome to our podcast „Woke as Science“. Today's episode is called “On Speaking Up”. To be fully honest, we first want to call it “On complaining”. Why do we wanna make an episode on complaining is because we received a complaint.

**Darian:** Terrible.

**Constance:** It was horrible. No, it wasn't horrible at all. It was actually very constructive and productive and got us to thinking. And then we thought, okay, what do we do?

**Darian:** But was it really a complaint we received?

**Constance:** No, it was more criticism, constructive criticism, I think on our

Darian: Constructive comment.

Constance: Constructive comment on our previous episode on is the university too left? And so what did we do?

**Darian:** We dragged the constructive commenter here to speak to us as punishment basically.

**Constance:** Yes. And we are really, really happy to welcome Sophia Longwe today with us, you’re a third year student in Global Studies. Do you want to introduce yourself shortly?

**Sophia:** Yes, of course. I would love to. Thank you so much for inviting me, actually, and also reacting to my comment on your last podcast episode. So I'm really happy to be here with you today.

**Constance:** Well, we know what it's like to be complainers as well, or to speak up or to give constructive comments.

**Darian:** I really feel like complaining has gotten a bad rap. You know, I think complaining is actually a really important social function. It's really important that we complain. It's also cathartic to complain. To get something off your chest, as we say, is a really healthy thing. It bonds us to other people to complain with them, and I think nothing bonds us quite so closely as complaining with other people.

I'm sort of sad that. We're so down on complaining and we have to use these other kind of more positive, nice terms, like, you know, speaking up or, I don't know, you had some sort of neoliberal construction, like …

**Constance:** Yes. Calling in and calling out.

**Darian:** Calling in and calling out. Yeah. That, that seems like a Harvard Business Review term maybe.

**Constance:** But you see that we are dancing around the term because it is a term that when you are, once you have the label of being a complainer, then you'll be put into a drawer and quite quickly people don't listen anymore to the contents of what you have to say, but to the tone that you bring it with or to the occasion that you pick in order to voice your concerns about a certain situation.

**Darian:** And people are always asking you to be constructive, right? So be aware of your tone, be constructive as though being constructive is some kind of requirement of every -

**Constance:** Yes, and can you please be a bit less angry? So that's what we are gonna discuss today with you, Sophia, because not only have you written, uh, constructive comments to us, but you also have some other experiences with being a person who brings concerns to other people, concerns that you experienced during your study or during your life in general. So, let's start with, I think, first question. So, someone who feels strongly about something and who wants to speak up, what's the first phase of this?

**Sophia:** I think what's really, really important for me is actually sometimes to just be angry in a way. I mean, you just mentioned it in a way being angry and I think that being angry is actually a really productive thing. Because actually, like anger is something that you can get out. I think Maya Angelou actually coined it quite well by saying you shouldn't be bitter because that kind of eats ya up upon the inside. But you should rather really be angry and dance it out, write it out, speak it loud. Um, so that's really an important element for me to first kind of like feel those emotions and then thinking, what can I actually do about this and with this.

**Constance:** Okay, so you have these emotions. You think, okay, I wanna dance it out. So what next? What are the kind of moments and platforms that you can choose?

**Sophia:** I think there are different ways. I mean, for my generation, obviously Gen Z, you know, social media is quite, quite an easy platform to kind of like share not only your anger, but in general just content that you care about. So, that's a really important element. But in general there are also so many other ways to, in a way raise your concerns. For example, I don't know, writing something like a report or something. Or like, for example, last weekend, which was super nice, we had a conference actually about exactly also those topics that you're discussing.

Um, “Wicked”, which was like an inter-faculty conference that instead of what my study usually does in global studies, kind of like looking outside into the world, looking inwards, what's actually going on here in Maastricht, what's going on at our university and what can we improve? And not only this thing of being like, okay, this is going wrong, but also what could we do right?

Like thinking about ideas and brainstorm.

**Darian:** So, I don't like the way this conversation has taken too quickly a tone turn for the positive. Um, so I wanna focus not, not yet on these constructive all these great constructive things that you're doing, but on the, on the complaining part, so you mentioned social media a moment ago.

I mean, do you not think that social media often just sort of descends into or complaining on social media, and I'm also often a part of it in, I like to complain about a lot of things on, on social media, but do you not think it often can, especially when it comes to, you know, social and political issues just kind of descend into a sort of rage frenzy that doesn't have the kind of construct-, I mean, you started to then talk about these, all these constructive activities that you're, that you're involved in. But I wanted to stick with the social media for a second.

**Sophia:** I think actually social media can be very effective as in also connecting with other people. So, if you're also talking about like bringing together academia and activism, for example, then social media is the platform for it, right? Because we can just all connect to each other. And then also, like this thing of like building movements at this point has changed so much because it's a huge part of like activism is actually taking place on social media platforms. So that's really essential, I think, to keep in mind and it's not just because it's happening in some virtual world somewhere. It's not detached in a way from the real world and it has an impact I believe.

**Constance:** You also mentioned before reports because I mean, social media is really going public with something, right? But you also, you mentioned very quickly you can write reports, but as someone who also writes reports, I notice is not that easy, right? Writing a report that has lots of work that goes into it. Lots of labor, actual effort, but lots of emotional labor as well because you have to find out, okay where, where is the pain point here? So, can you elaborate a bit on this?

**Sophia:** Sure. Definitely. Particularly like the report, a group of like black students basically wrote, and our study was about like particularly racism because we just cared a lot about how the program kind of addressed this issue and what could also like kind of be done better there. I know I'm, again, shifting to a positive part, but I believe that it's really important also there to, um, keep an active and constructive, um, discussion going because if you just like kind of focus on everything that's happening, that is bad, that's kind of frustrating and also doesn't really keep you going in a way. And instead, I think it's really important for me to also focus on like what happened and then thinking about what do we actually do with it? How do we react?

And also, in a way with the report, it's actually quite a proactive thing to do because we as students, we're actually not really meant to write necessary reports about such issues that kind of as extracurriculars. But, in a way it's also not our job, I would say. And that's really essential because Constance for example, you as the diversity officer, it's kind of your job to write reports and policy and everything.

**Constance**: Fair.

**Sophia**: But on our side and on our end it's kind of a thing that we did because we just wanted change in the program and we wanted that especially like students of color, black students just have a different experience in the program. So that's just what we did. We put it on paper.

**Constance:** What you just said about the report, right? You observed something that is painful for some, you observed something that you think, okay, that means that a program is not as accessible maybe or not as relevant for, um, black students or other students of color in a program. And then you write a report that not only highlights this, but also immediately goes into the happy, cozy, constructive site. Is that sort of rhetorical maneuver to keep the conversation going and you feel safer if you do this?

Because indeed it is also not your job to think about solutions, right? It is your job sometimes to flag problems that you see if others are blind to these problems, but to then come up with solutions. So, what is the relation of already putting solutions in these kind of reports?

**Sophia:** Hmm. That's a really tough question, but a good one. I can't speak on behalf of other people. I think that's one very important element. Also, when we're talking about different identity groups and then marking them, like labeling them as belonging to a certain kind of group. Especially like with minoritized and marginalized groups it's very essential for me to speak for myself, not for the others, basically. But, from my experience, I think that it's sometimes at an institution that is like set in Northwestern Europe and that mainly like, especially in their senior staff, is not as diverse as we would wanted it to be. In terms of gender, in terms of also other kind of elements, even nationalities and everything that, just as a student, I have the feeling that we actually just have a lack of, in a way, just capacity to talk about such issues. And of course, it also needs allies. It needs a lot of allyship from like specifically also white staff members for staff of color, for students of color and everyone. But, I think that we're still like kind of lacking behind there, but I don't know how you feel about it? You're both in like more senior positions at the university, so how do you think in terms of like diversity and also inclusivity at the university as in like which capacity do we have to facilitate an inclusive learning environment?

**Darian:** I don't know. That's your department Constance.

**Constance:** Well, I'm immediately, I mean, that is a bit also where my question came from because I think it might be a rhetorical maneuver to already include, um, solutions or ideas for solutions. But I also think it is when you say capacity, you also mean knowledge, right? And that is not in, in the sense of you, you know, people, our senior staff members, you know, are being educated in a certain context, right? It's not always a blame game here, but it is something that maybe the knowledge to address racism, for example, or other sorts of exclusionary practices in education, in the history of education, in the history of access to academia, that the knowledge and how to talk about this and what to do about it is just not there. So, it also feels maybe a bit like it's on your shoulders, and that's something that, that I recognize I think, from the work that I do.

**Sophia:** Yeah, definitely. And Darian, you just said that it's more Constance’s department. Why do you think so? Because I actually believe that diversity and inclusivity should concern everyone, right?

**Darian:** I, I was to an extent joking when I said its Constance’s department. I think one interesting thing is that there is a department that is devoted to this probably at every university in the Netherlands now, and probably at most universities in Northwestern Europe and certainly in North America. And one interesting thing is, who's responding? Do we then say it's the responsibility of that department. It's Constance’s responsibility. The rest of us don't have to worry about it. So that would be one kind of response. I think the other way is to say, well, we all have some responsibility to try to create a better learning environment, right? And then we can have arguments about what we mean by a better learning environment. And to what extent that better learning environment, I think most of us would agree that means we increase accessibility, we increase inclusivity, and in many ways we increase also diversity. And we can then have another argument, so, I'm a philosopher, we have lots of arguments, about what we mean when we talk about diversity, right? So, does that mean diversity of viewpoints? Does that mean diversity of staff members? If it means diversity of staff members, what kind of diversity are we talking about? You mentioned gender, we can talk about race, ethnicity, class. So, there are many different forms of diversity and I think most academics would probably would agree that greater diversity on all levels has a kind of epistemic value. So, it's good for the learning environment. I mean that, believe it or not, was also the argument that was made in our episode about “Is the university too left?”, that we need also ideological diversity in order to have a better epistemic environment.

**Sophia:** However, what I believe is also really important to raise in the, or like the issue in this conversation about diversity inclusivity. It's not only about like kind of this positive, nice side of the coin and of like increasing diversity and like having more inclusivity. It's also about the other side of the coin. Why don't we have it actually, like why are certain perspectives just not there and why is there like a very dominant perspective in academia that is very much present in our curricula, like all over, in all faculties, basically. Not just talking about global studies, but everywhere and how do we change that? Like it's not only about increasing diversity, but also about thinking, I mean Constance, you are a historian of science, so I guess that you know best like kind of where we, when we also think and talk about the history of science and where we come from in academia, then which perspectives were actually never highlighted enough and which perspectives are left out. And then speaking about epistemic diversity, it's great to have epistemic diversity, but we also have a lot of epistemic violence, right?

**Constance:** You have to elaborate on that.

**Sophia:** Yeah. , I brought a little poem from Grada Kilomba who wrote “Plantation Memories”. “When they speak it is scientific. When we speak it is unscientific, universal specific, objective, subjective, neutral, personal, rational, emotional, impartial, partial. They have facts, we have opinions. They have knowledge, we have experiences.”

What are your thoughts about this?

**Constance:** So, for me it goes now into the next level of complaining, let's say, right? So, you collected your input, your ideas, and you bring them to the table in whatever format, whether it's in form of a report, whether you are at a meeting, you know, you voice them. And this is what this poem, I think means to me because I see it happening all the time. It becomes the access, you know, you have access in a sense of you are invited to speak, but the actual access to the conversation is denied because it is unscientific, it's based on your own experiences, the whole list of adjectives that you just went through. So, that for me comes to this next stage of what happens in a moment when a complaint meets a group that is uncomfortable with the topic of the complaint.

**Darian:** The term opinion doesn't just refer to a sort of unreflected preference that someone has, but refers to the way that that person experiences the world, the way that the world appears for that person. And it's not a question of whether an opinion is true or false, the truth is in the appearance of the world in that way for that person. And I think that you used these terms epistemic, well, I used the term epistemic diversity, you used the term epistemic violence a moment ago, right? And I think epistemic violence for me is really about a kind refusal of accepting that the world might appear to another person in a different way, right? And refusal also to allow the space for others for various reasons, right, so we can talk about others and by the very fact of that refusal, those others are marginalized, right? Refusal to allow others to express and to explain how it is that the world appears for them. And in the poem that you read, that's precisely the dichotomy, precisely the opposition that gets made, right? On the one hand, we have experiences, on the other hand, we have scientific fact. You have, opinion and feeling and we have, whatever, epistemic truth, et cetera. So, I, I'm sensitive and sympathetic to that on the one hand. On the other hand, part of me is also uncomfortable with it in a certain way. Because the part of me that's uncomfortable with it asks, well, what do we do with what we would traditionally call epistemic, what we would traditionally call knowledge then. So, we can acknowledge certainly a suppression, we could acknowledge a repression of one side of that, right? But what do we do with the other side? Even if the other side is riddled with all of these problems at the same time? I think that's quite a tricky thing.

**Sophia:** I think that's kind of also, at least what we tried to do, last Saturday with “Wicked”, is actually bringing together this academic perspective of really being like, okay, this is knowledge and we're generating knowledge in a way. I don't really like the term producing knowledge, but I prefer generating. So, kind of then bridging this with activism actually, because I think both need each other. And activists can say certain things that academics might actually not be able to say because it's kind of like within their disciplinary borders that they don't have so much freedom in a way because you have certain yeah, values. However, what I would also mention, especially when it comes to knowledge generation, is that it's also important to see which point, like what's kind of your viewpoint, where do you come from, what's your positionality, and then also the implications that what you generate as knowledge has on the world and that's really important to keep in mind.

I think it's really important for me to acknowledge that science and what we do in academia is not neutral. It's never neutral. It always has implications and it's always important to also see that there's also a lot of violence that can like kind of be included in this and in the way we know and in the way that we also try to generate knowledge.

But, yeah, I just think it's always very, very important to also think of for example, this notion of safe spaces in a way. And also seeing maybe academia as a safe space because I don't believe in that at all. I just think that like, if you look at what also science was used for, especially also in the last century, but also sometimes still continues to be used for, it's also quite kind of discriminatory and oppressive ways of upholding a system and also a system of injustice. So, I believe that it's really, really important to acknowledge it's not neutral and then to move on from that point.

**Constance:** And we've been talking about this quite a lot, which kind of values have access, you know, which kind of values are in the university or in academia that then inform the scientific questions that we ask.

**Sophia:** Hmm. Yeah. And also just for me, I mean, I identify as a black woman and then just being in certain spaces where you are often also, sometimes the only one, sometimes there are a few others of you. But, it's often like kind of quite an alienating, isolating experience, I would say. Especially like kind of in academia and there I think it's also really important and how your presence is framed and also how the way that you then voice your concerns are framed because you are already kind of minoritized and marginalized. And then if you then also even speak up about that, that's a whole other level of, just in a way also systemic injustice. And there, I think one important experience from my side is being framed as an activist. So, you talked about framing already a little bit but I never really identified myself as an activist. I think there are people who are actually doing activism, who are really great people and doing amazing work, but I wouldn't take that credit and I also wouldn't want to take it however I was labeled as it, in a way. So, it's kind of also this thing of how you're perceived and how your maybe also anger, your emotions, and just your existence sometimes is perceived.

**Constance:** So why do you think people label you as an activist?

**Sophia:** Okay, well that's, that's a long story. Okay, so basically, I was raised in Germany and in Germany we have a colonial past, such as the Netherlands also has, which is often not talked about. Also like in the Netherlands sometimes. And basically there's this thing where pharmacies. There are pharmacies that are called, like in German, it's “Mohren Apotheke”, which is basically like a real big slur word for black people. It's basically like the N word in German. Like we call it the M word. And there the issue is that there are plenty of pharmacies in Germany called like this still, like in 2023. And basically my hometown there was also one of those pharmacies. So, yeah, me growing up there, I always like, kind of really didn't like this. So it was like, I went into the town and kind of walked along the pharmacy and was always looking at it, kind of like being like, no, this can't be it. Like this has to change. No way. But I never had the courage and kind of the confidence to speak up about it and to do something about it, especially in a way because I'm also affected as a black German person. So, then a few years passed, and I was like kind of still complaining about it, but like more with myself. Um, and then at some point when I moved to Maastricht, I was like, okay, this can't stay like this. Like I have to change something about it. So basically, what I did is writing an email to the owner of the pharmacy. And yeah, it was like during lockdown and then also the Black Lives Matter protests started. So like everyone, apparently directly like talked about racism and it was like a big topic. And then at some point I got an email from the pharmacist and like she wrote to me and was like, ah, yeah, I read your email and thank you very much for like telling me, should we meet, should we get together? And then like in the middle of lockdown, I went to this pharmacy and we had like a two hour conversation about like kind of in general racism, about kind of the name and I told her about the entire story of the word being very problematic in the context of enslavement and colonialism and everything. And also now everyday racism in Germany. And then the thing was kind of like that she tried to kind of defend herself a little bit. So, she was like more on the defensive side obviously being like, ah, yeah and you know, it's actually referring to Mauritania and how like those people brought you know, medicine and all of those techniques back to Europe and they kind of taught us and they were so far advanced. I was like, yeah, but there was something happening in between, you know, like a lot of violent stuff like colonialism, like enslavement. And then at some point she was like, okay, yeah, maybe I should change the name. And then, yeah, I was in Maastricht for like, I think already my second year of my studies. And then I got another email from the pharmacist who was like, kind of telling me, oh by the way, Sophia, I'm marrying and I'm renaming the pharmacy so I can do like both with German bureaucracy at the same time. And now basically, the pharmacy got renamed. It was also like a big event. It was on TV and there were articles about and everything cause it was like a big deal and I tried to take my name out of it, like my name is not attached to this. Like my email is like out there, but I just didn't want the shit storm. Because she got quite a shit storm for that, because if you change things that people are used to, they sometimes don't really like it. And basically what now happened is that she changed the name of the pharmacy into “pharmacy with heart”, which is super cute. And even her marrying in the same year is kind of wholesome. So that's super cool.

I think it's always important to listen to the people who are actually affected and to really give those perspectives the stage.

**Darian:** So, I buy that completely. I think I understand more or less what you're saying, and I also, I think would say, okay, if there is a, a group of people who say this term is used to apply to us and we don't like it, or if it's, it's offensive or it causes harm to us for all sorts of various reasons, I'm not sure what good arguments you would be able to make to say, you know, no, we should continue to use that, term.

**Sophia**: Yeah.

**Darian**: I'm, I'm still wondering about now this sort of cross-cultural situation for some reason.

**Sophia:** What's always very important for me is that kind of in a way assigned terms and self-chosen terms. So, this kind of like thing also where like Black with a capital B came from. This is kind of like self-chosen wording of the Black community being like, okay, this is kind of not our skin color, it's all about the sociopolitical identity. And they're kind of to then distinguish and to also in a way not use those old terms anymore that are quite derogatory language. I think it's also like for me quite an empowering thing to do because it's kind of self-chosen and um, what I always like to say, especially when doing this activist work and also like kind of teaching about anti-racism and also allyship and everything, it's very important for me to always distinguish between self-chosen and assigned language, but on the other hand also to say and give credit to the ones who kind of like determine those terms. I'm literally standing on the shoulders of giants, that's really important. There have been so many, like for example, black feminist in general, just black women all over, in Africa, in the US, in Europe, who've been doing such amazing work to actually problematize those old terms that come from colonial times and from times of enslavement, and to kind of move on beyond that and to kind of in an empowering way use language.

**Constance:** And you can see how difficult this fight to access this power bastion of language is, right? I mean, here, there is really a fort build around it, right? And I'm looking at Darian, every time when someone is trying to explain why a term is potentially harmful, right, we go through the same mechanisms of first defending and of first trying to say but that's not how I meant it, or, you know, that it is actually referring to something else. But I wanted to come back to the pharmacy of heart's story, which, first of all, apparently you have a good track record of writing emails and then being invited.

**Sophia:** Yeah, it works well.

**Constance:** Yeah, it works well. But second is that whether we call this activism or whatever you wanna call it, it is a way of engaging in the conversation, right? You get access to have the conversation. And in the many experiences that you have, whether it is in the pharmacy or whether it is here at the university, in the moments when you addressed a concern and you were invited to speak about the concern, you met with epistemic violence, if you wanna call it like this. You were met with other forms of defense mechanisms, all kinds of ways from, trying to exclude you from the access to the actual conversation. I also remember in a pre-talk you also mentioned procedures are sometimes used to not have the conversations. Like procedurally, is this not correct, you know, or we need this kind of information, otherwise we can't do anything about this. So, there's all kinds of maneuvers to not let you in or to not have the conversation, to not listen to it. How do you deal with that?

**Sophia:** That's also a tough question. But I think that it makes a lot of sense also for the defensive side, like in my head, I have words for this now and it's quite empowering. Also, as I already said, to have words for it and to like kind of have access to all of those books and podcasts and all of the knowledge out there that people who are, for example, in my case, affected by sexism, racism, have produced in the past couple of decades, hundreds of years, whatever, like for a long, long time definitely. And there I think that it's quite empowering to just read those texts to just be like, okay, this is out there, like institutional memory in a way. I can go back to this. I know this is tone policing. This is kind of derailing, this is victim blaming in this case. This is very empowering. And then also, I mean, your podcast is about wokeness kind of not letting people appropriate certain words. For me, for example, wokeness is quite an important term also in the work that I do, because for me it simply means being awake and being aware of certain things and why shouldn't we be aware and awake of certain things? And I get that because especially if you're not affected by racism, but you're more like on side that, yeah, basically you're not affected. Um, being called racist or kind of being assigned this term of like, oh, this was racist what you said is quite a bad thing because we don't want to be bad people, right? Like we want to be good. And there, I always like kind of answer, being called racist isn't that bad because that is something that you can fix like you can actively engage with anti-racism. You can actively do anti-discrimination work. You can actively work on becoming an ally. It's a process. It's a marathon. It takes a lot of work. Like it's not a sprint where you're just like, read one book and then you're anti-racist. But it's possible. And in a way, for me, that's very important that, if you're called out, if someone speaks up and you're kind of like called something, like in a way that you're discriminating someone, then do something about it. Like do the work.

**Constance:** As a student. You're a student, right? Saying this to a teacher, that's a, that's a kind of hierarchical situation which you are in that comes I can imagine with worries or other obstacles.

**Sophia:** Yeah, some I guess. Um, but I think that there is also, in a way, not only a question of privilege, but also of power. And you just mentioned hierarchies obviously, but as a student actually, and also like, even if I don't feel like an activist, but being perceived as an activist, I also have a certain sense of freedom. Like I'm not speaking for anyone. I'm speaking for myself. And of course, like, I don't know, in courses and everything as a student you get graded and stuff but I'm not dependent on the hierarchy as such. Like I'm not junior staff or anything. I don't know. You were junior staff at some point. Did you feel like you could speak up about certain things if they were controversial?

**Darian:** No. I think even as being senior staff, there are many things that you feel very apprehensive or uncomfortable about speaking up about and I won't mention them because even as senior staff, I'm nervous or apprehensive about it.

**Constance:** Sophia, thank you so much. Do you have any last points, tips for the many people out there who are on the side, who wanna speak up, who see things going wrong, and who have concerns and who are in the process of, or already in the middle of addressing them?

**Sophia:** I think on the one hand, be courageous. Like it takes a lot of courage to speak up and also a lot of confidence and sometimes it also takes away a lot of energy. But specifically also on the other hand, and especially if you like, hold a lot of privileges and if you like, want to be an ally to people who are affected by kind of structural discrimination, then listen. And read, and educate yourself. Like don't just like ask people, oh, are you experiencing racism? Like, no, don't do that. Just like listen to some podcasts, read some books, and really actively engage with like kind of this thing of like becoming an ally. That's really important. And then on the end of like performative allyship, that's kind of sometimes a risk, especially we talked in the beginning about social media that it only kind of like is talking and no real actions behind that. It's really important that it's also kind of like in action. Like really, like do something about it, do something about injustice that's really important and you make mistakes. I also make a lot of mistakes. I made a lot of mistakes, also while complaining, and it's always important to acknowledge this and to like kind of keep on self-reflecting also on your own position in the world and what you can do about it and what you can also do with it.

**Constance:** One thing I remember that you once told me is that sometimes in the moment, in the moment when you raise a concern in front of someone else who does not maybe take it on board or react very defensively, but you once told me, well, but sometimes weeks, sometimes months, sometimes years later, you actually see that it was still worth it.

**Sophia:** Yeah. It's never in a void.

**Constance:** Well, it's never in a void.

**Darian:** I don't like a positive, a positive ending to our session on complaining. I think we should end with a complaint.

**Constance**: That that was one.

**Darian**: Yeah, my complaint.

**Constance**: Yes.

**End of recording.**