



Transcript

Episode 07: “Otherwise Good People” in Workplace Discrimination, with Shanaaz Gokool

Intro

[intro music plays]

Hi! I'm Rosie Yeung, your host on Changing Lenses. In this podcast, we change our lens, to change what we see. Because seeing differently, lets us live differently.

[intro music ends]

Prologue

So I've been re-watching one of my all-time favourite TV dramas, House, about a super-smart medical team that solves cases no one else can solve. The show ended in 2012, and in the last season, just 8 years ago, one of the characters was a female East Asian doctor (Dr. Park), who joined House's team because she was kicked out of another department after punching out her boss. And why did she punch out her boss? Because, in her words, “He grabbed my ass”. The storyline was about how she might get fired for punching a hospital employee, and had to defend herself in front of a disciplinary panel. What happened to the white male doctor who allegedly grabbed her ass? He sent a hospital-wide email apologizing for an “incident”, and said that he had taken voluntary sexual harassment training.

Here's some actual dialogue from the show:

House: You are so fired.

Park: He grabbed my behind!

House: Word is, it was a “celebratory slap”.

Park: He grabbed it, he apologized for grabbing it, and now he's taking classes because he grabbed it!

House: The classes make him sympathetic! Which in turn, makes his unrepentant attacker evil. Which in turn, in turn, makes you so fired.

Now, even though this was just 8 years ago, I truly don't remember this plotline at all, so I can't tell you what I thought about it at the time. I can tell you that watching it now in 2020, I'm utterly horrified. Dr. Park even went through a disciplinary hearing where she cried and begged for her job. It's hard to believe that 8 years ago, this was really acceptable on TV, let alone in real life (which TV mimics). Have things changed that much since #Metoo?

So why am I bringing this up?



Probably because I see similarities in the way other accusations of harassment, oppression, and discrimination are handled even in 2020.

Before #METOO, there were policies against sexual harassment – but how often were they enforced, or the victims (mostly women) believed? What did the victims have to go through to get their claims heard? Who did we not hear from, because the system made it too hard for them and their witnesses to come forward?

Before #BlackLivesMatters2020, how often did we attribute claims of racial discrimination to the claimant’s “sensitivity” or “misunderstanding”? Before cell phones, how often were police exonerated in cases of police brutality?

Today’s podcast guest is Shanaaz Gokool, a female, person of colour, former CEO of a human rights charity – who is now fighting for her own rights to be upheld.

The legal case is still ongoing, so we did not discuss the details, nor the legitimacy of either side’s claim. And honestly – that’s not the point of this podcast, nor what I want you to focus on.

What I heard from this woman, was a story of trauma, of powerlessness, of pain – the impacts of which go far beyond “just” being fired from a job. It’s a story of how “Otherwise Good People” – people who would probably say they aren’t racist, don’t see colour, are being objective – end up contributing to the systemic problem when they don’t take a stand.

I know, from my career as an HR professional, that when it comes to employee claims of wrongful anything – the employers are in the position of power. Power is not just about authority. It’s about access to resources – which include lawyers, insurance, and money to pay for all that. It’s about bystanders being too afraid of repercussions, to speak up for their colleague. It’s about access to media and controlling public opinion.

In every corporate sexual harassment case, one woman had to come forward first. Imagine the courage that would take.

As you listen to Shanaaz’s story – not just her own, but many others she’s helping who are fighting their own anti-discrimination battles – I’d like you to be aware of your honest response. What are you thinking about the individual? About the company? What questions are you asking? What doubts do you have?

I hope that this episode changes your lens, to see what you can do to share power, and reduce discrimination.

One more thing – I apologize that the audio quality for this episode is not great. I appreciate your patience and understanding that this is a home-made podcast, and we work with whatever audio equipment we have! There is a transcript available, which you can find along with the shownotes on my website, changinglenses.ca/podcast.

Thank you for listening.



Guest Welcome and Introduction

Rosie: Hello, I'm glad you joined us for this episode of changing lenses today. We'll be talking to Shanaaz Gokool, lifelong human rights activist and not-for-profit discrimination disruptor. She's also the former CEO of Dying with Dignity, with whom she's involved in an ongoing lawsuit for wrongful dismissal and systemic racism and discrimination.

Despite many obstacles Shanaaz and her team made significant advancements for assisted dying and end of life issues, including ushering in a new national movement. So Shanaaz, thank you for all that you do, and for being here with us today.

Shanaaz: Thank you Rosie for the kind introduction, and I'm really glad to be here and having this conversation with you.

Rosie: Awesome. I'm so excited. So today Shanaaz and I will be discussing a topic that I was personally challenged by. I think that by now, most of us are aware that racism, discrimination and exclusion do happen in Canadian workplaces. And it is pervasive, from the largest corporate business to government to charities and not-for-profits.

But what I did not believe was how bad it could get, going beyond unconscious bias and systemic discrimination, which is already bad enough, to levels equating to workplace harassment. That's all I'll say for now, because Shanaaz can describe it much better than I can. Suffice to say that there's definitely an aspect of our work environments that I don't think gets enough attention. And so I'm glad that Shanaaz is here today to help bring that to our awareness.

Safe Space Commitment

But before we really dive into that conversation, there is something that I want to share with you and our guests on every episode. Some of what we discuss may be sensitive or challenging for us to say, and for you to hear. But I really want us to have an open and genuine conversation. One goal of Changing Lenses is to be a safe and brave space for these conversations, and for us to be our real selves. So I welcome you, our listener; and you Shanaaz; into this safe space. And I invite you to call me out if I say anything inappropriate or use the wrong terms.

Shanaaz: Well, Rosie, thank you for that. I really appreciate that. I'm sure your listeners do as well. And I also extended that invitation right back to you.

Rosie: Thanks for that as well, Shanaaz, I really appreciate that. And maybe actually on that, you know, that's kind of a great kickoff to hearing more about you and what your work is, but more importantly, why you got into it, why you think it's important and just kind of what you want us to know about this thing that we're not aware of right now.

Shanaaz: Sure. Well, there's a lot to dive into, so I'll try to summarize as best I can. But before I get into it, I think it's really important for your listeners to know, I'm not a lawyer, I'm not a human resources expert. I can't provide legal or HR advice. But I can provide insight into these issues, through my own lived experience, and as a human rights activist who's been deeply involved in a



number of court cases and national advocacy campaigns. And also as an emerging governance expert on issues of discrimination in the not-for-profit sector. And I think it would be helpful for your listeners to have just a brief summary about my experiences. And why they matter?

Shanaaz's personal story of workplace discrimination

Because it's still in litigation, I can't say a whole lot. But in essence, last fall just a little over a year ago, I launched a wrongful dismissal and systemic racism discrimination lawsuit against my former employer, Dying with Dignity Canada. In doing so, and I did not know this going into this until I started researching more, I became the first immigrant, Canadian, woman of color, and former CEO, to blow the whistle on systemic discrimination that I experienced in my workplace.

And it's important to note here that, of course I'm not the first executive in the non-profit sector to have experienced this. I'm not the first CEO who may have filed a similar lawsuit. But I am the first Canadian CEO in the sector to go public with the lawsuit and my claims. And a lot of it has to do with the costs of speaking publicly. The costs are just too high.

And you know, for me, I think one of the most painful ironies is that when I've worked on advocacy for medical assistance and dying, all of these issues engaged section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Section 15 is the equality clause and the right not to be discriminated. The human rights framework that I bring to assisted dying put us on the map nationally and internationally on end of life issues and the right to have a medically assisted death in our country and in other places. And I still wasn't treated equitably.

And what I see from that as sort of a stark contrast. One minute you can be celebrated for your advocacy and calling out discrimination. And then the next, you could find yourself out in the cold precisely because you raised issues of systemic discrimination that you were experiencing. As a former CEO and someone with a significant international media profile, the precariousness is surprising.

Other Canadian workplace discrimination stories

And so I spoke out about my experiences because I wanted to make a difference. And I didn't know, last year, what that would look like. And in February of this year, I read about another woman's experience, and it was Chelsea Rhodes. And she, back in 2011 with Engineers Without Borders experienced sexual harassment and began speaking out publicly in late 2018.

So I reached out to her, we met online and that conversation was game changing for me in a lot of ways. She'd done some research on engineers without borders. These issues are rampant, sexual harassment, racism, homophobia, transphobia. And even though our stories were different, there were many similarities in terms of the actions of our former employers and the impacts on us. And so it really helps me to see that while individuals' stories are different, it doesn't really matter who you are in the organization. You could be the intern, you could be entry-level, you could be executive. We can all become targets of discrimination.



And that inspired me to start reaching out to others, in the non-profit sector, who had also spoken publicly and who would speak with me. And what's really interesting about this is that this was all before the end of May and the murder of George Floyd. Before that it was maybe 15 of us in the entire country that had spoken out about protecting human rights grounds and how we were discriminated against publicly either through a combination of speaking publicly launching a human rights complaint, or a lawsuit. Very, very few of us.

But then after the end of May and after the murder of George Ford, I felt the ground shift underneath my feet. And I think a lot of people felt that same way. And now we see all of these stories emerging in the non-profit sector and also in other sectors. And so I knew these issues were rampant, and now this has been confirmed through all the media stories. And also with all of the many people who shared their stories directly with me.

But while all this was happening, I started thinking. What if you were a single mom in Toronto, and you earn \$55,000, and you hit the wall of discrimination? Who's going to be there to help you? And so while I continue to look for a new professional role, I'm also in the process of launching a new non-profit that will focus on advocacy work to expose and dismantle all of the places that discrimination can hide in the workplace. And really importantly, to support people who find themselves up against that wall of discrimination. So I hope in the coming weeks, that there will be some announcements, with a new website and what our work is going to be.

You know, when I first raised these issues internally at Dying with Dignity, I had no idea this is where I was going to be today. And it just shows sometimes how traumatic experiences, combined with your professional expertise, can chart a whole new course that you had no idea you'd be on. And that course of action may help so many other people.

Rosie: Shanaaz, I'm listening to you. And just holding everything that you're saying, in a sacred place kind of. I haven't been through what you've been through, but I can imagine the pain and the trauma. And I honor your bravery and vulnerability, for not just being here on this podcast and saying this, but for all that you've been doing. So, thank you for standing up as a woman of color, a CEO, and a pioneer in work for people who want assisted dying and, yeah, I just want to honor that and hold that kind of space for a moment.

Shanaaz: Thank you, Rosie. That means a lot to me. I think that I recognized when I started asking myself that question about the single mother in Toronto, I have a, still a lot of privilege. I have a significant network of support with family friends. And for me, it was the right and responsible thing to do when you have that kind of privilege, because people are coming forward. People with far less privileged than me. People who are risking, a lot of long-lasting consequences in your life and your career. I think that we need people to speak up. We need people who are witnessing, to engage in their privilege as well.

And so, I think that for a lot of us who do speak up it's because we want to make a difference, we want to let other people know that they're not alone, but we also want to feel less alone.



Rosie: Absolutely. And respecting that for both legal reasons and emotional reasons, I don't want you to have to reveal or talk too much about your own circumstances. But are there perhaps some examples you could tell us to help us understand the depth of the reality or the wideness of that reality of these are some things that are happening in real life that we may not be aware of.

Failing to share power, leads to failure of governance

Shanaaz: Yeah. And I think that the best positioning to sort of really understand these issues, whether it's in the not for profit sector, like how can this happen? How does this happen in the corporate sector? And the unifying theme in these different sectors and in all of the different stories that I've heard it's about power. And the access or a lack of access to power.

And what was seen in the not-for-profit sector in particular is a concentration of power in supposedly what is the governance practices. But that is where this breaks down, this is an abject failure of governance and of leadership, because what I'm really saying is that it's an abject failure to share power.

And I think that it needed this heightened moment or this, you know, months long pandemic. Combined with the ongoing stories of Black, Indigenous, People of Colour in Canada, in the U.S., who are being violently attacked, in some cases killed by the police.

So you needed these elements to come together to sort of have all of this bubble over and for people to understand, because they're all about power and not having it. And then, you know, when I think about, overt and systemic racism, they rely on two key things.

Two things necessary for racism

First, in order for racism and discrimination to continue, you need silence. Silence is very, very important. And the second is problematic because it puts people in what they think are awkward situations. We're talking about the good folks, the "otherwise good people", a friend of mine coined them as the "OGP".

The "Otherwise Good People" who won't stand up. Who won't speak up and who won't support the target of the discriminatory behavior. You know, I refused to be silent and in doing so, have now seen other people who are also speaking up because the acquiescence to silence means nothing is ever going to change, right. It's the acquiescence to the status quo.

Systemic discrimination makes a lot of good people, "Otherwise Good People", the "OGPs", the talented people I work with – members, donors, supporters of the organization – through no fault of their own, complicit in discriminatory behavior and practices. And that's how insidious this is.

You know, sometimes for some folks it's hard to spot systemic discrimination because people in Canada and in other places have largely believed for many, many decades that unless you're calling someone a racial slur, there is no discrimination. There is no racism. And so I think it's always important to understand that systemic racism and discrimination, it can be written into laws or



regulations that may significantly disadvantage one group, or advantage another group. But it's also part of societal and social norms that really haven't been challenged.

And when it comes to the person, systemic could mean that there's been a pattern of behavior, over a period of time towards a particular person, and that the behavior and the impacts of it, may be unconscious to the perpetrators of that behavior. And so we hear the expression of unconscious bias. Which to be clear is only unconscious until it becomes conscious. And it is no longer unconscious. And after that point, you know, people, organizations, institutions, they can no longer hide under the cover of unconscious bias. That's when your actions are intentional.

And that is so important as a country. We're no longer in a state of unconscious bias about systemic racism and discrimination. It has been "conscious-fied", if that is a word, since the beginning of late spring and the beginning of the summer. And then the question is, well what do we do now?

Rosie: There's a lot there. I just keep nodding my head at what you're saying. And that phrase, the otherwise good people really hits home with me. I hope it hits home with a lot of you who are listening too, because I think that's probably 99% of the population. Most of us, I think, would say we're good people. And we might even say, well, we would never tolerate racism and discrimination if it happened in front of us, but we do. Like the other term you used, complicity, is very true, right? Because when either we deny it, or remain ignorant in front of it, or kind of question it - I'll probably get in trouble for saying this or making this comparison, but it really does remind me of people in abusive relationships. Where the person in the abusive relationship may not even realize it, they're just so used to getting that kind of abuse. And then people around them are like, well, if they're not complaining, then maybe it's okay.

Or, well, it's not my business. You know, we don't know what kind of relationship they have, so maybe it's okay. And I don't want to interfere in somebody else's work or business. But that really makes me think of the Otherwise Good People in the workplace, right? Where there might be stuff going on. Maybe we don't recognize it. Maybe we do, or maybe we just feel uncomfortable.

Let's give people the benefit of doubt. Like maybe people truly thought this was okay, but it's not okay. Can you give us an example of something that often falls into that bucket of the Otherwise Good People don't end up saying anything. But it is a human rights violation. It is discrimination. It's something that should be stopped.

When “Otherwise Good People” try to be neutral

Shanaaz: I'm going to give you a very personal example and it's probably not a fair one in some ways, because of the position that I had at Dying with Dignity. But I think it's very illustrative. So when I went public last fall with the lawsuit, and as someone that was recognized internationally and nationally on these issues - not a single leader in this space, not one, came out in support of me. Not a single person said, "Oh, we find these allegations deeply troubling. We remain very committed to ensuring better access for medical assistance and dying. We're very focused on that." There was only one leader of an organization that spoke out in my defense publicly.



And that was really hurtful for me. You know, that's the opportunity where you have to step up and at least acknowledge that something has happened. We don't know all the details, but you can at least acknowledge it, but nobody would.

And then in late, early February, I was invited to speak at the largest, most influential assisted dying conference in the country. And arguably in North America. And so I received that invitation. People knew, the lawsuit was public by then, there were two stories in the Globe and Mail. And I was invited because I'm a subject matter expert.

And so I was really excited because when I was fired, I never had an opportunity. One, to say goodbye to so many people; and two, to thank them. For their work, helping me to become a better and more informed advocate on these issues. So I thought okay this is great! And then four days later, the invitation was revoked.

Rosie: No!

Shanaaz: And yeah, that was crushing for me. And my body had a very visceral reaction and it just shut down. Three days in bed being very emotional and crying. I know that this happens when you hear stories. But I just didn't expect it to happen to me. And, the reason that I got was that, it's a total political decision. Some members of their planning committee felt that by having me on their stage, they were endorsing my litigation. While at the same time, they were accepting sponsorship from Dying with Dignity Canada. And so by their own logic, they were telling me that they had endorsed them. That's your logic. That's what you're telling me.

Rosie: Yep.

Shanaaz: And these are people I know. They know me. I've spoken at this conference every year since its inception. And you don't invite a subject matter expert because I called out discrimination? Which has nothing to do with the conference other than I'm an expert in calling out discrimination on assisted dying? So that was really shocking, but I didn't realize until after May, that my mind finally caught up to my body. My body was telling me you didn't lose a job. You lost a career.

And you know, those are some of the things that sometimes happen to people. Other people have other stories where they find themselves outside of the sector, that they have worked in for decades. And it's a crushing experience, but you learn. I have this sort of thing that I say, you learn so much going through these things. You learn a lot about yourself. And you'll learn a lot about other people. And sometimes you wish you could unlearn the things you've learned about other people, but you can't, and they become part of how you are informed to navigate and move forward in the future. That the otherwise good people can turn their back on you.

Rosie: And Shanaaz, you said as part of this that you realized you hadn't just lost a job, you lost a career. In and of itself, that's already a lot, but what I'm hearing is it goes actually even deeper than that. You lost a network, you lost friends, you lost colleagues, right? And these are otherwise good people who one day, you could call them up and they would pick up your call, and then now they won't. Without any real basis or evidence, either way.



So I feel what you're saying right now especially the, I thought you knew me. Right? Like whether or not you agree, whether or not you know all the details. We've personally interacted. Why would you now kind of cast me out or marginalize me further? Potentially out of fear? Like I, yeah. I can understand it, but I can't condone it.

It's the Board of Directors' responsibility, not just HR's

Shanaaz: Yeah. I think, you know, I go back to power and relationships to power. And so there's been a tendency, in the not-for-profit sector in particular, to look at these issues on protected human rights grounds, which includes bullying and harassment - to sort of put them in some little package, called human resources. But these are matters of governance.

And so I think that when we put them into the package of just human resources - which yes, it is part of that - there is a narrative that comes out that says, that's he said, she said. It's the same things we've heard before #Metoo, right? You know, all these issues. That's a, he said, she said. When black men and women were being arrested and killed and murdered by police officers, that's a he said, they said. And then we had something called cell phones. And we had video cameras, and we have email and we have evidence.

And I think that, it's hard for people to understand these issues, except to marginalize them and make it into some sort of personality conflict. When actually these are issues about power. They're systemic. So when we understand that these are systemic, these are about failures of governance.

And then they spill over into the public space. And then, you know, you see these stories and then you hear, Boards on different organizations were shocked, "we had no idea". It's not true! You do know. These issues have been raised. In some cases staff members have gone, as I did, directly to my Board to say, "Hello, there's this looming large issue here." You can't say you're shocked or you're surprised afterwards. You had that.

And unfortunately, the what happens next part is consistent in so many of these stories. Either, you know, the person who's raised these complaints find themselves escorted out the door through a firing like I did, or they find themselves exhausted, marginalized, and targeted out. They quit. You know, it's just too hard. They're going to work around that. They're going to leave. They're going to go quietly someplace else where, you know, there's this hope that maybe you won't experience it, but I can guarantee you someone's going to experience it. Because it's just such prevalent and pervasive problem throughout our sector.

That's why these stories have gone public. It's because people have left. And they go public because they want to make a difference, but they also care about their former colleagues, and what they might be experiencing, knowing what they experienced themselves.

So it's complex, but it's not rocket science. There are ways to address them structurally in the organization. I mean, organizations have a fiduciary duty, there are legal responsibilities to put that in your by-laws, because your by-laws and your articles of incorporation, your, your -

Rosie: The legal stuff. [laughs]



Shanaaz: Yeah, the legal stuff. Those are your governing documents. Those are the documents that your membership, your staff, you as Board Directors, as donors, that's where you go to for accountability. And if it's not included in the by-laws, cause it's just a human resources issue, you're failing your fiduciary duties. You're failing your legal responsibilities. You're failing your people and the people that your organization is supposed to support. And so how do we want to, embed and discuss power?

And I think that, shuffling away these issues into human resources matters is a cover. It's an apology. "Oh, no, we can't talk about that. You know, there's all sorts of confidentiality." The people that want to talk about it are waiving their confidentiality. They want to have these discussions, but it's a way of ensuring that power isn't fully shared and vested with other key internal and external stakeholders within the organization. And so I think that the root of this thing lies there.

Rosie: And something you mentioned early on. I keep smiling at an image I have now in my head, about the, now we have cell phones. And imagine if people use cell phones in the office. Well, now we're all at home, but if we were in the workplace. Imagine people used cell phones like we're now seeing on the street in the face of police brutality or at the grocery stores, you know, and filming things. I'm imagining employees walking around with cell phones filming the meeting or recording the audio of what people are saying. Or in the boardroom, you know, in the board meetings and having videos.

I wonder what we would see. And I wonder if those were then published, how many people would be like, "Oh, but that's just a culture fit issue". Or, "Oh no, that person, it's their style," or whatever. Like all these excuses, because we haven't seen what's really happening.

And then when people are trying to tell us, people who are the marginalized or the silenced, try to say it, then people aren't believing them. And I am a Board member, I've worked with many Boards, and Board Members want to make sure the policies are in place. So what I tend to hear a lot and I think I've said it myself is, "Oh, we have a policy for that." We have a workplace harassment policy, we have an anti- this policy. And we have a whole procedure. If someone wants to make a complaint, they can just do that. So if we don't have any of these complaints that go through the policy, we must be fine.

And I think it's pretty clear from what you're saying, it's not all fine. And actually these policies and practices don't necessarily work the way people think it does. So what do you want employers to know or Board Members to know, and do, and change that what you think maybe is working, isn't working. And here's the impact on your people. Here's the cost of what it would actually take for someone to speak out against something that was wrong.

What Boards can do differently to address system discrimination

Shanaaz: Yeah. Good questions. I think just briefly, looking at the policies, the practices. That gap between like, here's what we have in the writing. Let's just assume we're talking about an organization that has stuff in writing. Many don't, right?

Rosie: True.



Shanaaz: But let's just assume you have a policy. The space between the policy and the actual practice, that gap, that's the power gap, right? Like that's the we say one thing, and we do another thing. And while those people who were complaining about these things, they don't have access to power. So I think that's a good articulation, a very practical one, on how we can understand the practice when there are policies that exist, but practices that just don't align with the policy and don't align with the values and the mission of the organization.

And so if I was sitting in front of a group of directors, doesn't matter what sector it is. One thing I would say is, you have to properly and independently investigate these complaints on protected human rights grounds. You can't pass on it. You've got to do that in a meaningful way. You know, once again, committing to the organization's fiduciary duty by embedding the responsibility to protect people on protected human rights grounds in by-laws, and also outlining the grievances process.

I will tell directors, stop using confidentiality clauses and settlement agreements about issues about protected human rights grounds. In Canada we have a thing, it's called free speech. It's protected. And the one place that should absolutely be protected is when you're speaking up about protected human rights grounds.

So stop trying to silence people. If you had dealt with these matters internally in a proactive, compassionate, and a wise way, we wouldn't be in some of these situations that we see in so many stories now.

The kind of discrimination story we need right now

Here's what's missing from all of these stories. I want to see the story where an organization and staff of various backgrounds come out and say:

"You know, we had this issue in our organization five years ago. We had all of these systemic, discriminatory practices that we weren't fully conscious of. It was really hard and messy work. It's still really hard and messy. But, you know, here are our staff and they want to talk about their experiences, and that they're still here with us because they believed in our sincerity and our authenticity, to really address these concerns and not cause further harm.

That's the story that we need to hear. We need to hear stories of organizations and people who are doing this work to give the rest of us a template. That we can go to, and say, look, this organization over there, this is how they dealt with it. Wasn't perfect. But it seems to be a work in progress going in the right direction. And we don't see those stories because unfortunately there are far and few in between.

Don't fire the people who are telling you what's wrong. LISTEN to them.

I know too many instances of people, staff people who spent time, thoughtfully articulating what they've experienced. Who've had suggestions on how can we possibly work through this. And who were dismissed and marginalized and either fired or left. And I just think, when people speak up



internally, if organizations changed their lens, and saw these people - whether they're staff or volunteers who are raising these issues - not as troublemakers. Not as people who are entitled, whatever that means. Not as people who have poor performance, which likely is not always the case, but as, people whose voices of concerns, we need to champion.

Because whether all of what they've said is true, or this is how they feel, and that is true to them. People raise these issues because they care, because they're invested. Look at it from that lens, and then everything can shift. We can get a completely different range of options on how to address these issues.

Rosie: Yeah. And actually, you know, if you think about it, people pay for surveys because they're not getting enough feedback. So when people give us feedback, whether it's wanted or not, that's actually very, very valuable.

And when people give it to you for free. You could toss it out, I guess, if you want to, but you're getting it. And a lot of people don't even get that feedback. So yeah. People should be grateful, I think.

Shanaaz: Absolutely.

Rosie: And I agree with everything you were saying about what Board members and management should be doing to, frankly, protect their employees and to listen to their employees and how to deal with cases of human rights complaints or other that comes up in the workplace.

And to their credit, I think a lot of organizations do at least try for that, right? So it's not that the majority of organizations out there are bad. But the reality is that there will continue to be that power imbalance. And part of that power and balance is the amount of resources that organizations have, even charities, to pay for legal advice or things that will protect them and guard their liability. So, for people out there who are listening, who don't have that power. So the victims in this case, or people who aren't sure. Maybe I'm going through this and I don't know what I can do because I feel like I have no power. You're not giving legal advice, but any advice from your own experience that you would want to tell people that they can do for themselves?

Three tips for victims of workplace discrimination

Shanaaz: Of course, I mean, and there are some things that people can certainly do. And I do want to say that sometimes these cases take a while to appear for the person, because they may have trouble sort of understanding what they're going through, whether it's systemic discrimination or not.

1) Validate with your colleagues. And so I think that, when people are going through this, a piece of advice I'd like to give people, is have those conversations with your colleagues. Maybe bystanders or who may also have experienced discriminatory behavior that you don't know about. If you see and witness something that you think is discriminatory, but you're not sure, go and talk to your colleague. Is this how they interpret it?

They might say "Yes, it was awful." And, "Oh, I didn't know." And there's some real allyship that can come from that. But they might say, "Actually, you know, the greater context in which this incident



happened is this thing." And "No, it's not really discriminatory behaviour. It's poor behaviour." Like you might find out through that conversation that it's not what you think it is. And so I think that those conversations can be awkward and they can be uncomfortable. But I think they're really important. And so even just sharing your story as a way of validation, is important.

2) You don't have to prove intention. And I think that one of the things that's really, really important for our listeners to know, has to do with intentionality. I mean, how can we prove that that's really systemic racism or discrimination? Like that that person, that they intended to do that. So unlike criminal cases, there is no requirement to prove intent that that person intended to discriminate. That's a very important distinction in the law. And the reason there isn't a requirement to prove intent, I think it's kind of funny, it's because we don't live in other people's heads. So we don't know whether they intended, but we can certainly look to words actions and behaviors.

And I think that one of the things that you just said triggered something in my brain. That when we look at systemic discrimination, and especially when we we're in that unconscious bias sort of state of things. That, you know, what is being said is not that you're bad people or that you're a racist or you're sexist. It's that your behavior, your actions, are racist, are sexist. Does that mean you as a whole person are? I don't know, I don't live in your head.

So I am less concerned about people that are responsible for these behaviors in their workplace. I'm very concerned about people who have been targets of discriminatory behavior and the impacts on them and their feelings about what has happened to them.

[side note – if you're worried about appearing racist - It's not about you!]

And what I'm more concerned about is what we can actually see and measure and analyze. The words, the actions and the behaviour of a person, a group of people, the organization. That we can regulate, that we can make determinations about, whether those actions were discriminatory. It doesn't mean you as a whole person, is a discriminatory person. I don't know. And that's not what the focus should be.

And I think that when we look at it that way and we separate that yes, you're responsible for this behaviour. But you don't have to continue on with this behaviour. We're actually telling you that these are some of the things that your behaviour has resulted in. You have a choice! You have choices about who you want to be and how you want to deal with it. And I think that is a very important point.

And that's where so many organizations fail. They interpret what has been said in these complaints as some sort of determination of who they are as a whole person. No!

And you know what, it's not about you! It's about the impacts on the person who's going through this thing who's telling you. It's about them! Listen to them, be present with them, meet them where they are. Do the things as an organization you're legally required to do and morally and ethically required to do. And that's what we can judge you on, right?



3) Draw on your support networks. And so I think that, when people are going through this, you know, another piece of advice I'd like to give people, is to draw deeply on the well of their networks, of the support that they have. There is a well there that sometimes we don't realize until we go through something like this. And you find out that there are more people there who want to support you than you ever knew before. They will help you get through. There are people who are walking right beside you, if only you'd let them.

Rosie: Really powerful words, Shanaaz. Something I'll add to the part you ended with around the support network is, if you're going through something, your network may not look like what you expect. And perhaps people that have been your support network all along, they haven't been through what you're going through. And so, very legitimately, sometimes they can't understand or they won't be able to support you in that way. But then there are other people out there. I mean, Shanaaz is awesome that even you, yourself, you didn't know that there were other people out there until you found them through LinkedIn. And then through meeting people, they introduce you to other people.

It's like, oh, you're really not alone. Like there's a whole group of individuals that have had experiences. And that shared connection in that shared talking about it and starting the healing is so important. So I'm glad you found that. And I hope that for anyone else, who's looking for that and not finding it maybe through their normal places - or perhaps they've even been rejected. Like you shared Shanaaz that former colleagues of yours weren't there for you when you thought they would be. So that's sad, but it's normal. But there are other people out there who are supportive and you may just not know them yet, but they're there.

Shanaaz: Yeah. And I think it's, you know, when you are able to tap into networks of support, what you're also tapping into, is spaces where people want to share. So they want to share their experiences. And sort of being able to situate yourself in the context of, okay, I'm going through this.

I'm not the only one. And having that access to their information, their stories. That empowers me. And so, the advocacy I want to do in the future around, you know, tearing down the walls of discrimination and sort of the structures that need to be revised, is how do we help people find other spaces of power. And I think that, you know, not everybody will want that. Not everybody needs that and that's fine. But some people will. And that's where we have to keep going back and looking at the relationships to power and how we share it because sharing power is about being better.

At the end of the day, you know, I'm just really glad to have this conversation. The conversations that you bring to the public through this podcast and the space that you give is about sharing power. And that is powerful and so important as we continue forward with these issues, which are not going away anytime soon.

Contacting Shanaaz for further support

Rosie: Thank you for saying that, and you're totally right. I'm so honored that you're able to come here today and just share so much of not only your personal story, but really good thoughts, good insights, inspirational ideas for how things could be better. Just even thinking back to what you've said



repeatedly around finding that network, sharing your stories, sharing power. I can imagine a lot of people would want to follow up with you and maybe have some questions or share their own stories. Are you open to being reached in any way?

Shanaaz: Yeah, absolutely. Right now, the best way for people to reach me is on LinkedIn. And I know you can publish the details on your website.

Rosie: Yes.

Shanaaz: And when we, you know, I hope to see a website up in the coming weeks. And there will be ways to contact me and others that are sort of working on these issues. And the big piece of that work is supporting people in the sharing of their stories, informing the advocacy work, just letting people know that they're not alone. And so I speak to people about their experiences. I try to think strategically about some of the advocacy wins we could get without having to go to court.

And I've heard from many people that I've spoken to that just speaking with me has been therapeutic, that they see themselves. I see myself. When I, you know, hear these stories and people share with me, I'm always struck by how much we have in common. And it's humbling when people share with you. And, you know, just grateful that they do because so much more is going to come from those conversations.

So, absolutely. People can reach out to me.

Rosie: Thank you for offering that. I know that many people would benefit, and I'm sure they're probably already excitedly looking you up. And thank you for the work you're doing. We wish you all the best with the launch of your website. And as you said, this is sadly, it's kind of just the beginning because there is so much work to do out there.

But I have a lot of hope for the future, knowing that you're on the case [laughs], and you're working on this stuff. So I'm just really inspired by how you turned your own situation into something that is a force for good, and that will benefit a lot of people out there that really need that.

So thank you for your courageous and inspirational and ground-breaking work that you're doing. And thank you for being a guest today on Changing Lenses.

Shanaaz: Thank you so much for having me.

Outro

[outro music plays]

Thanks for joining us – I hope today's episode helped to change your lens and expand your worldview. If you enjoyed listening, please rate and subscribe to Changing Lenses, available wherever you get your favourite podcasts. For more about how I'm changing my lens, please check out my website at changinglenses.ca. You'll also find the shownotes and transcripts for each episode, and you can leave comments or questions, or send me a message – I would love to hear from you!



I'm Rosie Yeung, inviting you to join me for the next episode of Changing Lenses. Until then, take care!
[outro music ends]