

Episode 45: Tasnim

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

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What does it mean to be a Disabled British Bangladeshi Muslim woman based in the UK? In this episode, Tasnim shares her stories of growing up in a predominantly White neighborhood with her various identities, and her journey in pursuing a career in the disability space. Her story is about the importance of continuous self-growth and love.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Tasnim.

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T:

So my name is Tasnim Hassan and I'm a Disabled British Bangladeshi Muslim woman based in the UK. And it's [identity] always evolving in a way that I sort of introduce myself. So I would call myself a "Disabled researcher activist with a particular interest on the intersection of disability and race, both in theory and in practice". So by theory, what I mean by this is that I'm currently coming to the end of my Ph.D., which is exploring and looking at how Disabled Black and Brown communities in the UK navigate that intersectional identity. And to delve into this into a bit more detail, the purpose of this research is to sort of shed light on our collective experience and our opinions. It's a piece of work that strives to center Disabled Black and Brown people through using qualitative data – so in that sense, interviews – as well as quantitative data – so in that sense, questionnaire. And with this, my hope is that it can be used to better understand what matters the most, highlight our shared experiences, but also highlight how it's actually much more complex.

And then by practice, I am currently doing a bit of freelance and consulting work where a lot of my focus is on how we better embed intersectional experiences, challenge systemic barriers, and promote inclusive practices. So I've worked with all kinds of organizations that include universities, local authorities, community driven grassroots spaces, charity and voluntary sector, some with a race focus, some with a disability focus. And I've kind of touched on all various areas such as employment, education, fundraising, and grant making, health and social care, as well as policing and movement building.

And I think what I love the most, but also what has also been the most challenging, is that I really enjoy thinking critically, thinking really deeply. But these sorts of topics can come with such weight challenges, and sometimes it's not the easiest thing to get into. But being able to make it much more digestible and more accessible is a passion of mine. And I find that I find working collaboratively and as a collective, really, really enjoyable. There have been points where it does come with its challenge, but it's such a privilege being able to work with different perspectives and supporting and empowering one another and especially when it comes from a place of genuine care. And I also really appreciate in a way that it has played such a big part in my personal and professional growth, especially when we consider things such as COVID and the murder of George Floyd, there's been a lot of change going on globally. It comes with its labor, but ultimately, this has really pushed me to be more reflexive and to grow.

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Tasnim delves into the various obstacles and barriers she faced.

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I think what's really interesting now, looking back at my journey of growing up, is how much of my experience was shaped by a number of factors that back then I wouldn't have been able to put a finger on. So for example, I grew up in a predominantly White area. Neither race nor disability whatsoever was really talked about or acknowledged or even addressed. For example, early on, I remember a time where I would completely refrain from using my cane because I hated drawing attention to myself. I think back to the support that I receive and how it came at such a point where it was very, very delayed, or it took a lot to try and find it. I know during my educational journey at school, there were a lot of instances where I couldn't keep up. I forced myself to see teachers in my free time, only to realize that back then, I literally wasn't able to keep up with what was being said, what was being written on the board, and so on.

And at university, where I had a little bit more freedom in a way that allowed me to be able to work in a way that was much more accessible to me, I performed a lot better than I did in my early school years. But at the same time, I barely read from books in the library because libraries don't always provide an electronic copy. And if there is that option, it's followed by a lot of admin and advocacy on my part. And even during at points where I've been employed there and there, I found that... this was a time where before I got hearing aids, I remember getting feedback where I was told that I was being rude and not engaged in conversation. And that sort of feedback really stung. And that was combined with the fact that I was told that I needed to be more resilient, only to realize that because of my hearing, I couldn't keep up. And I've learned that... I've learnt it in another role of mine, about the UK government's scheme called *Access to Work* that would actually fund equipment, and more importantly for me, fund transport to and from work because public transport wasn't accessible for me. But I've also realized actually, with the help of other disabled support networks, who actually pointed this out to me, that I require a support worker in order to do my job.

And I think just from the few examples that I said, what I really want to highlight is, what's so interesting about this is that when it came to, for example, the delay in the support and the delay in information, I ended up internalizing it back then as a lack of family support. But when we really think about the healthcare system much more broadly and how it's institutionally racist – for example, that there are barriers to accessing healthcare services – my whole journey of getting support and the right support at the right time was never going to be an easy process. So, for so many others who are in similar situations to me, when we reflect on those comments about being rude and disrespectful, it's also important to recognize that racialized communities, especially women, widely speaking, have been associated to aggressive difficult behaviors. And then when we think about the extra cost that is such a huge cause for concern for both disabled and racialized communities, it explained a number of instances of wide and void, you know, spending money on getting a taxi and end up risking my own safety, especially when we're thinking about the fact that I am someone who is visibly South-Asian Muslim and a woman.

F:

Tasnim reflects upon what helped her along her journey in rethinking and addressing barriers.

T:

I think for me, the moment where it really really clicked, was in my university experience. I found myself basically getting involved in student activism, more specifically, disabled student activism. And I found that although I had faced a lot of barriers myself, I wanted to do whatever I could to help alleviate some of those barriers that other Disabled students may face in the university. And as much as I enjoyed my law degree and I enjoyed it, I actually find myself at university spending a lot of time dedicated to anything disability specific. And I found that if I cared and I was this passionate about it, then maybe this was the way to go. Because one of the opportunities that I had, again, recognizing my privilege and being able to do it, is, I was able to go to national student conferences where I could

meet other Disabled student officers. And in this space, it was the first time – bearing in mind I grew up in a very predominantly White area – it was the first time that I met diverse Disabled people talking. Black Disabled people, Brown Disabled people, queer Disabled people, all kinds of impairments, and all this sort of stuff, which wouldn't have happened if I stayed in the city that I lived in and if I stayed in the university that I lived in.

And I think for me, being able to connect with people and see how our experiences, irrespective of where we were, was exactly like yours, I was able to see just how much our experiences are connected because we have all of this intersection or aspect to our identity that we all kind of share. We share a lot of things. At the same time, we will have lots of different kinds of aspects to who we are and why our experiences might be different. But what I loved about this space, was the compassion that came with it and understanding about whatever barriers I may have faced or why I was up against this and stuff like that. And that's what I absolutely loved. I ended up getting more and more engrossed in that at the national level that I recognized that if I wanted to do more about it, I'd have to look to whatever research is out there, and with research you can make things which are more evidence-based and really be able to tackle the root of the problem.

But, upon researching and looking and Googling and all those sort of things, you realize there's not that much on it. And that itself lend itself to me, you know, undertaking a master's in social research method because I thought, "Hey, if I have the skill to be able to develop and create research related to Black and Brown Disabled people's experiences, we can use this research in a way that can support our communities in a much more sustainable long-term way." And then, somehow along the lines, I managed to make that dream come true by being able to bring it to that Ph.D. side of the things which is hopefully coming to an end. But in that in itself, I'm hoping that whatever comes out of that, we're able to kind of highlight data that proves, "This is our experiences, and therefore things need to change."

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Tasnim reflects upon the questions of how to embrace intersectionality and build coalitions.

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I think for me, it was a bit of a confusing journey knowing what terminology to use. I think in a lot of these sort of student activism spaces, they use the phrase "Black" as a collective term, as a wider umbrella term, and what I really, really liked about that approach is that it brought people together. I think we live in a world, especially when we're thinking about that mainstream media side of things, that wants to divide racialized communities and almost pit them against each other. But we can't allow that to be the case. Because if we allow that to happen, it ends up weakening our overall movement, our overall message, and things like that. So I'm always conscious that whatever terminology that I use, that one has to sort of be accurate in terms of who we're focusing on, because racialized communities encompasses so so many things, but also to the fact that we're working on solidarity with each other. And I think that *that*, for me is such an important part of the kind of approach that I take.

And it's interesting. I feel like a lot of what I've read when it comes to the race side of things, focuses a lot on like, you know, much more specific to the Black experiences and things like that. And when it comes to my *own* experience as a British Bangladeshi person with my parents who migrated to the UK in the 1960s 70s sort of time, what's been interesting is, over time, when we're reflecting on Black experiences in the UK, I've asked a lot more questions about my own experiences as a South Asian person, as a Bangladeshi person specifically in the UK, because there's always going to be that erasure of knowledge or the erasure of voice and things like that. Luckily, we're kind of seeing more and more people being able to share their perspective, being able to share more books about it. There's literally a book that I came across, which kind of actually focused on a town where my dad would have moved

to the UK. And that's the sort of stuff that I would not read normally. And I *love* that stuff because it just really highlights that there is a lot to learn.

I know at times it can feel like people may have a difficult relationship when it comes to their racial and ethnic identity side of things, especially if experiences haven't been positive, but I think being able to bring it to that wider collective broader experience and really be able to connect ourselves much more broadly speaking, we're able to understand that, you know, my experience as a Bangladeshi person is going to be similar to another South Asian person who might live on the other end of the country and stuff like that. And that's happened through my research. I've seen a lot of experiences, in that sense, that there's someone in the north of the UK who shares very similar to people in the south and east and the west. And I feel like for me, when we see that pattern, we know it's no coincidence. We know that we share so much in our experiences, that there's so much to learn. But where the problem is, is because of the sort of challenges racialized communities face, ie., you know, when it comes to poor employment outcomes and things like that, especially in the capitalist world that we live today, a lot of the pressures on our kind of communities is about surviving, and it takes away the ability to be able to focus on what our heritage means to us, to be able to focus on that in a more positive and strong aspects of it.

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Similar to the race space, the disability space also has certain challenges related to terminologies. Tasnim highlights the challenge of finding collective terminologies and approaches that account for a wide range of experiences and preferences.

T:
It's so interesting because I feel like nobody wants to, at least for the most part, wants to offend. Nobody wants to go wrong. Nobody wants to say something that's bad. And in a way, I think that helps us kind of remind ourselves that the world isn't a bad place and nobody actively, for the most part, means harm, and things like that. Because we've also seen similarities with what pronouns to use or how to know what terminologies to use, whether we're going to use "BAME"¹, or "People of Color", or "Disabled person" or "person with a disability"... There's all kinds of these terminologies to use. And I think for as long as you're open-minded and recognize why certain words are going to be used more than others, why people might have certain preferences...

So for example, I call myself a "Disabled person". But I very much see that as like that sort of collective experience of it. And a lot of people aren't going to be as comfortable using the label as a "Disabled person" because they're going to, you know, there's a tendency that I've seen a lot that they view being disabled as a negative thing. But it's sort of like, I'm not denying that I experience disabling barriers, but as a Disabled person, I recognize that society needs to be able to address the barriers in life that disable us, not *us* being the problem. It's society that can help shift it. And if we are able to view society in that way and be able to have, you know, to be open-minded, you can really learn from one another. There is no one size fits all.

But I think it's also worthwhile just being able to do research, being able to ask these sorts of questions. I know for especially in a lot of disabled spaces, you're going to have people who are going to literally help themselves by either physically touching you or... they might mean well, but what they don't recognize with what they're doing is that it's intrusive, especially as a woman, you do not want anyone to touch your body in any shape, way or form. But the idea is, you just treat people like humans, you just ask whether they need help. They can tell you if they need help. And then you move on. Someone

¹ Acronym for *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic*. It is a terminology used in the United Kingdom to refer to all ethnic groups except White ethnic groups.

tells you that something you've done isn't right, you acknowledge it, you apologize, and then you try your best to not be able to do that again.

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Although Tasnim identifies as a "Disabled person", quote unquote, she says she doesn't find the need to tell people what her impairments are.

T:

One of the reasons why I'm probably not a big fan of talking about what my specific impairment is, is the question of, "Do people need to know?" Do people need to know what my medical information is because that sort of information is private. I very much call myself a "Disabled person", and in spaces that I try to navigate, I feel like there's no need to almost basically over-explain yourself and who you are. And we already understand that from a racialized aspect of, you know, "Where are you from? Where are you *really* from?" You know, those sorts of questions. And in my experience of kind of making sense of this, we see similarities, like, "Oh, you're disabled," or, "How disabled are you? What can you and can you not see?" And those are things, what I think over time, we get frustrated with it because you shouldn't have to justify who you are and what you can and can't see and all of those sorts of questions as well.

I feel like over time, I've become a little bit more confident to walk into spaces and just tell people that, you know, "You don't need to know what my medical history background is, but, what you do need to know and what I need to also communicate is, *how can you support me?*" If, for example, there's going to be materials there, I will communicate to you that what I need from you is to be able to put this in larger font. If I'm in a meeting, I'm going to make it clear that I'm going to need people to repeat themselves and that should be enough. If, for example, there's going to be a place that we're going to and I'm not familiar with it, I'm going to ask, "Hey, can you meet me at the entrance and we go together?" And things like that. I think that's something that I'm always conscious of as someone who sort of had to navigate how we talk about our racial identity, but also for me, how we also navigate our disability identity as well.

And I think for me, it is that when we think of access as exclusively a disabled people thing, we're getting it wrong. Every person has preferences in the way that they want to talk to each other, how they want to communicate, and things like that. And it's important to recognize that access and ease, it applies to us all, not as specifically a "Disabled people matter". People are going to want to know how is it best to send you information and we're all going to have preferences and different styles. So for me, the more that we almost kind of *normalize* that, because it's not normalized, we end up actually taking an approach that embraces that element of genuine care for each other because we want everyone in the space to feel included, regardless of who they are.

F:

Tasnim reflects upon the various instances in which she has made mistakes in addressing issues related to race or disability, and the importance of creating spaces in which people can learn from their mistakes.

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There are things that I had gotten wrong, big time, that I look back and you're almost sort of cringy, like, "Ah dammit, why the hell did I say that? I should have known better. Why did I not know better?" And things like that. But what's really, really helped me in that kind of developmental growing scale, is that I've had the privilege to be connected to other like-minded incredible human beings who I absolutely wonderfully respect, and they've just played such a big part in me. And in this sort of space with these people in it, they've made it a safe space to be able to kind of, you know, talk to each other, highlight to each other that we might be saying something that's not exactly appropriate, or we might

be without realizing, internalizing Whiteness, internalizing ableism in ourselves, but not really recognizing that.

But what I love about this sort of space is being able to have other people to be able to highlight, you know, "This is what you are doing whether you are consciously or not consciously [doing it]", but also there's that learning together approach because they've been in a similar situation in these sorts of spaces. It's also been intergenerational. So I really admire the fact that people have made time and space to be able to explain these things to me, because naturally, I think our tendency is to get defensive when someone tells you you're doing something wrong. But I think when you know that the people around you are saying it from a place of actual care and you can trust them, I think *that* for me is really important. I don't think there's ever such thing as a "safe space", per se. But I think it's also just recognizing that these sorts of conversations don't come easy, and we should be open to learning and holding ourselves accountable, recognizing that we're not always going to get it right, we're here to learn.

And I don't think that journey ever ever stops. Like, I am 28 right now. And I just think to myself, in about a decade's time, even if I'm going to be doing this work for basically the rest of my life – we'll see – I don't think I'm ever... I don't ever want to get complacent with the things that I know, or assume that I know, you know, what's right or what's wrong, and things like that. A lot of it is always going to be based on community related experience and community engagement. But I also feel like the moment that we think to ourselves, "Oh, we know a lot about *this*," I think that's where we end up going down the wrong path.

F:

Against the background of her experiences, Tasnim says what she thinks it takes to create inclusive spaces everywhere.

T:

I think what's really important is to just be able to create a space where it is open. That's not always going to be easy because I think whatever situation you're in, there's always going to be the dynamics of lots of things going on. If you're someone's manager, you have to recognize the power dynamics that go in there. If there's a young person joining a group or meeting, you're going to have to recognize that when you're a young person in a space full of lots of very well senior established people, that going to lead to a lot of natural and very understandably anxiety that's going to be in there. You're going to have to understand that if you're thinking about having a meeting in X, Y and Z, and you're conscious that there's other people who are going to find it difficult, it's about being able to be proactive and look out for each other.

When I was talking about access and ease and care for each other, it's about for everyone. It's about understanding how we look out for each other and to be proactive about that. Anyone from any kind of oppressed marginalized background knows that there's a lot more hurdles to bring. But what we can do to bring that love and support and trust in there, is to be able to look out for each other and to be able to really think about, you know, "Is this person okay?" And things like that. Because I think there's been situations where I've seen in meetings and WhatsApp groups and stuff like that, where you can take a much more empathetic approach to recognize, "Actually, is this person going to be okay? I can understand how it might make this person feel." And it does wonders being able to just have someone check on you and ask these questions and to see how... because I think the more we give love, my hope is that the more we get it back as well.

I think *that* is honestly the basis of a lot of the work that I do. In a lot of the consultancy things that I do, I want to make the time and effort and energy to actually know people involved in the project because the more we develop these meaningful connections, the easier it's going to be to be able to

be honest with each other and to recognize that this person might be saying this from, you know, a place of genuine care. Even if you know they have certain frustrations, at least I understand where they're coming from. But being able to have that space, being able to develop these meaningful connections is so so important. I think we live in a society that doesn't prioritize that, that doesn't prioritize getting to know people. We live in a world where it's all about outcomes, outcomes, outcomes. But what we forget to do is be able to be there for each other. And when we're able to be there for each other, we're able to collectively grow so much further than if we end up taking a much more individualistic approach.

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In closing this episode, Tasnim shares her aspirations.

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I absolutely love storytelling. I didn't even realize that I got so into it. I mentioned that I did a lot of student activism side of things. So a lot of our experience was convincing people to vote for me so that I would do a good job for people. And I remember really, really thinking about how much in awe I was in so many people's speeches. And I think a big big passion of mine is, because these topics, you know, they are daunting, if you especially look at what's going on in Gaza, how do you talk about that in a way that makes you feel like you're informed? And also recognizing the sort of counter arguments people going to say about you, sort of things is really important, because people are going to be able to be like, "Yeah, but this, yeah, but that."

And I think maybe that's why – I'm not as good as it now – but something I know I'm going to look to in the future is to be able to share my opinions a lot more explicitly, a lot more, you know, in more "obvious limelight", basically, because the more the conversations are being had, and I know I felt this from other people sharing this on Twitter or sharing it on LinkedIn, or wherever it is, that I'm a bit like, "Oh wait! The way you've just framed it absolutely sums up what I was thinking about it! I just don't have the words for it." And I want to be able to help people in that sort of sense as well because it's such a complex topic to talk about. These are complicated things, and there's a lot of hesitancy to put yourself out there. But I also know that the more you put yourself out there, the more you're going to be subject to a lot of criticism. Not all of it is actually going to be in good faith, that's something that you have to acknowledge. There's going to be some not so great comments. I've had them come my way and that's quite challenging.

But I think being able to have debates is so important. If we don't have the space to be able to kind of challenge things, we end up only having *one* way of working, *one* right way of thinking about certain situations. But we need to be able to be open to debate in a way that is not harmful, that does not evoke violence, that does not evoke hate, that does not put any kind of community at risk and things like that. But the way in which the world works, it's challenging. So I can see why people wouldn't be as confident putting themselves out there. So I think something that I do aspire to in the future is being able to write a lot more, being able to put a lot more out there, being able to support others to be able to voice their opinions a lot more all in a very supportive, empowering way.

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You can find more information about Tasnim's work, as well as articles, books and videos Tasnim recommends people to take a look at on racism and disability on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on February 7th!



This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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