

EEP 130- Saira Rao: Why White Women Need to Talk About Our Racism

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Maria Ross, Saira Rao

Saira Rao 00:00

Starting to be comfortable with talking about these things out loud with your friends, with your family with your colleagues. Maria the bar is so low for white people it is underground. So, I you know, I know you work with folks in Dei, we talk we say this in the book, it's a lipstick on a pig situation. It is not about a race or eradicating racism or white supremacy or anything, it's to make people feel good. And it's checking boxes, we are the opposite of that. We are the opposite of that. And so, this is about something so basic, you cannot change that Regina says all the time, you cannot change what you won't acknowledge. Right? So if you're not acknowledging your own racism and white supremacy, you can't change it. And all we're saying is start having the conversation. start acknowledging and start having the conversations. That's it. That is literally it.

Maria Ross 01:40

Talking about racism is hard. But ignoring it doesn't make it go away. Empathy requires us to be humble and curious, and to sometimes have hard, honest, emotional conversations. Only in acknowledging wrongs, can we make things, right? And that actually benefits all of us. Today, my guest, Saira Rao gets real about the role seemingly well intentioned and even liberal white women play in supporting the patriarchy and oppression. And yes, that means my role too. She and her business partner Regina Jackson founded race to dinner, an organization dedicated to igniting conversations that acknowledge how we are complicit in creating, enabling and engaging in oppression and white supremacy, conversations that can lead to liberation for all of us. So, we can frankly acknowledge racism in our schools, companies and society and dismantle it. Saira is also the CO subject and executive producer of the documentary deconstructing Karen, as they write in their New York Times bestseller white women everything you already know about your own racism and how to do better. If you cannot see color, you don't see white power. And if you don't see that you don't see your racism. And if you don't see racism, you can't dismantle it. Today's conversation goes far deeper than DEI efforts which Saira will share her opinions on. We talk about how race to dinner got started. What Saira experienced in her run for Congress a few years ago, how she and Regina is voices have even been censored by the BBC. Why white women's conditioning to be nice and not rock the boat is killing people of color, and the

hard choices we need to make if we truly want to save our country and communities. As Saira says in the interview, we are dying, and we need to take risks become aware and have hard conversations with each other. As she states. Once white supremacy goes away, many of our societal problems will go away too. I got to admit the book was difficult, candid and made me both sad and angry at times. But it gave me hope. It enlightened me. It opened my eyes and every single word written is truth. We must face it. I encourage every white woman listening to this podcast whether you're a CEO or a college student, to read the book and watch the documentary, honesty and collective action will make us a very powerful force for change. Take a listen.

Maria Ross 04:25

Saira, welcome to the empathy edge Podcast. I'm so so genuinely excited to have this conversation with you today. I finished your book last night. I have sheets of questions. And I'm really just excited to amplify the work that you and Regina are doing. So welcome to the show.

Saira Rao 04:41

Thank you so much.

Maria Ross 04:43

Okay, so quickly. Let's give people who have not been familiar with her work who have not yet read your book. We will have links in the show notes. So, folks, you will have to check out the book when you get a chance but tell us a little bit about your work at race to dinner. And we've been a little bit of your story of what, what made you come to this work, and what you're most passionate about and what it is that you do with the different programs you have in race to dinner?

Saira Rao 05:10

Sure. So, our book, you've just read, it's called white women, everything you already know about your own racism and how to do better. And it's sort of the book version of our work at race to dinner. So, I am South Asian, first-generation daughter of Indian immigrants, my partner at Race2Dinner, a black woman named Regina Jackson. And together, the two of us have actual in real life dinners and zoom dinners, but mostly in real life dinners with eight between eight to 10 white women, where we facilitate, they're not their dads, not their friends, their racism and their white supremacy and helping them to start the journey of dismantling both. And what that looks like, is extremely raw, honest conversations. And these are conversations that white women have been trained not to have. It's not only like, no, gosh, I've never really had it, you've been trained explicitly not to have it, because it's impolite to talk about politics at the dinner table, which means shut the fuck up about race, you know, racism, sexism, ableism, all of the ism's transphobia, homophobia. So, the foundational part of white womanhood is to not have these conversations ever, but especially not in your sacred space of of your dining room. So, we specifically chose the dining room to have these conversations. So, once you have it, you could do it again, it's not so scary everyone, as Regina says, Nobody died, you know, during that dinner. And white women are nothing if not polite. And you know, it wouldn't be nice for white woman to get up and stormed out of the dining room, which at every single dinner, there has been at least one who would really like to do that. And so, it's twofold. You're you're kind of stuck there, right. And you can also do it again, again, and again and again and it's happening. I mean, it's actually working. And so, the that's race to dinner, the program, the book, is a way for us to scale the message, because we are only two

people. And now we don't even live in the same city. We both were in Denver, I just moved back to my hometown of Richmond, Virginia a couple months ago. So, we're still doing the dinners, but they just are more planned out. And one of us has to fly for it, at least one of us has to fly for it. But the book enables us to bring the work to now. I mean, the books only been out not even a month and it's in its third printing. It's already a New York Times bestseller. 10s of 1000s of people have already bought it. I mean, it's kind of like we're doing something, you know, right. And we have a documentary out that just came out a couple days ago called deconstructing Karen, which is an actual dinner, you can actually watch. It's a dinner that was shot in Denver in the summer of 2019. So those are in we have a slew of kids' books coming out middle grade, and one early, I mean, one illustrated children's book called Race to the Truth series. So, an indigenous woman to Indigenous women, a black woman, Mexican American guy and a Chinese American woman have written those. So, we're expanding into schools. And we have a program called Race to community, which Maria, I would highly suggest you do. It's an eight-week program run by a resident white woman, Lisa bond, who's all over the book. And she works with white women cohorts of eight to 12, I think white women, where all you do is deconstruct your whiteness, you do not even talk about black and brown people. All you do is talk about whiteness, and what whiteness looks like and how you can start deconstructing it.

Maria Ross 08:33

So, so many things I love about that. I I'm also just curious how you and Regina came into each other's orbit. And I'm super curious how Lisa bond at your resonant white woman that's referenced throughout the book, and I know she does a lot of your programs with you. Yeah. How did you all connect?

Saira Rao 08:52

So, I think a testament to the power of our work is this was 1,000% organic. And it's pretty new this we started this in 2019. And we have a whole last pandemic in between, like, we couldn't even do these dinners for a big chunk of that time, right? We're only in 2022. So, I ran for Congress in 2018. In Denver, I ran, I was trying to primary out of what a super liberal white woman who has now been in Congress, like a billion years, and has done exactly zero and made a statement to a friend of mine, a brown friend of mine that civil rights are not one of her issues. This happened in 2017. So, I wrote an article that was published by Huffington Post in December of 2018. Called um, a brown woman who's breaking up with the Democratic Party, it went viral. And what I got Oh, and a lot of this is in the movie deconstructing Karen is is why Why don't you run for office? And I'm like, can't we critique our government without running for office? But then I'm like, I have so much privilege. I've able bodied privilege I've class privilege. If I don't at least challenge the status quo. Shame on me. So, I did. I was one of the last people filed with the FEC to run for Congress in January of 2018. In February of 2018, we did a poll, I was given a 2% chance of getting more than 12% of the vote. And in five months, I got 34% of the vote upwards of 42,000 votes. And my entire platform was anti racism, abolishing white supremacy within the Democratic Party. White supremacy is the Genesis the basis, the foundation for all the ills that we have in this country. You eradicate white supremacy, you're getting pretty far with with positive policies, policy changes. So Regina volunteered on my campaign. That's how we met. That's how I knew Regina. And she would notice it every single every single event I spoke. I mean, I wasn't nobody, I was a complete no name, random, middle aged Asian lady.

Maria Ross 10:45

I remember you actually announced your candidacy at the organization I knew you through which was CEO, when you were a finalist for their pleasure.

Saira Rao 10:55

Yeah yeah

Maria Ross 10:56

And you stood on stage and you said, and you'll be the first to know I'm running for Congress.

Saira Rao 11:00

Yes, yes. And I would like, and every event I spoke out was packed, packed. And, and it was white women waiting to talk to me to tell me, not me, not me. Not all white women, you've got the wrong one. And they would ask me for coffee and for drinks and for dinner. And I would have to do all that because I was trying to court their votes, of which I got none. I got more white male voters and white women voters. And, you know, that was the whole it was very frustrating and horrible. And then I lost. And Regina had a friend will call her and, in the fall of 2018, and comes to her and she says, You know what, Regina, I'm done with Syrah. She hates all white people. But can you set up a lunch for us? Regina comes to me. And I'm like, you know what? I'm done. Like, I have a whole laundry list of these white ladies who are trying to have lunches and dinners with me. And by the way, the straw that broke that Karen's back and back is that I said that beta or work was a white savior. I said beta or work is a white savior and I just donated to his campaign. And if I lived in Texas, I would vote for him because multiple things can and are true can be and are true. But I say to Regina, I'll round up some of these other white women who have asked for dinners as well. And I'll do it if you come with me. So, we did it. We had a dinner in someone's in someone's house. And it was full white woman Broadway musical crying arms folded. One lady got up and circled the table like like it was just outrageous.

Maria Ross 12:28

And then so Lisa came into the orbit through the campaign as well or whatnot. So

Saira Rao 12:32

That was how race to dinner formed. And I posted about it on Facebook, and it went viral. Like we just had one dinner. Maria, this was not a anything. I posted about it on Facebook. It went viral. Regina and I were like, I mean, if we're educating her onto something, yeah, we might as well do it. Yeah. So, Lisa, had taken an article I had written and put it in, she lived in Chicago at the time, she put this article in her white woman, like mom group, and she and these were liberal, white women. And she said, My God, like they went nuts, ripped me to shreds all of it. And she said, Holy shit. This is This is wild. It's literally what this woman is saying. So, she Googled me and saw that I had started this company, and reached out to us to say she wanted to do a race to dinner. So, Regina and I went to Chicago did a race to dinner. So, Lisa was a host of one of the dinners. And we ended up just staying in close contact with her. And that's how we brought her in eventually into being a resident white woman.

Maria Ross 13:38

I love it. I love it. I love that you call her the resident white woman. That's great. So, one of the things that I want to share or amplify is what is the goal of the dinners? Because, you know, you share some

pretty horrific experiences, how they sort of the dinner sort of fell apart. But then I thought about it and I thought is that the intent? Or you know, sort of what is the goal of the dinner? What are you hoping to leave people with? What's that? What does success look like a successful dinner?

Saira Rao 14:08

Starting to be comfortable with talking about these things out loud with your friends, with your family with your colleagues. Maria, the bar is so low for white people it is underground. So, I you know, I know you work with folks in dei Dei, we talked we say this in the book, it's a lipstick on a pig situation. It is not about a raid, eradicate ing racism or white supremacy or anything. It's to make people feel good. And it's checking boxes, we are the opposite of that. We are the opposite of that. And so, this is about something so basic, you cannot change that Regina says this all the time. You cannot change what you won't acknowledge. Right? So, if you're not acknowledging your own racism and white supremacy, you can't change it. All we're saying is start having the conversation. start acknowledging and start having the conversations. That's it. That is literal Really it?

Maria Ross 15:00

Is it also getting them to notice or getting us to notice more than they we have in the past. It's another marker of success of like that epiphany.

Saira Rao 15:10

There's no marker markers of success. That's all very white supremacy, capitalistic colonial thinking markers of success. There's nothing like that there was no box to check with anything that we do. I would say if people really need to have a marker of success, I'll tell you what, I did an interview last week with TMZ like TMZ, how funny, right? A white guy and a black guy. And they say to me, right when I get on, they've been their CO hosts, their famous co-hosts. And they say, Oh, my God, we watched your movie. And we just had a conversation that we've never had with each other before. We've just had we spent hours this morning. And then you know, three minutes in the white guy makes a statement who's like, well, I don't agree with you know, this, or this or this, that you're saying, and I'm like, I don't care. But you just said that the two of you who have known each other and worked together for years had a conversation that you've never had before. goal achieved. Like, you don't have to agree with everything we're saying. But if you're actually having conversations that you've never had, before, that you yourself said we're transformative, just from watching a 72-minute dinner of ours. That's we're doing something. That's great. That's it, have the conversations, right? Start having the conversations first with you, with yourself, start digging deeper, I mean, start noticing, yes, start noticing behaviors of your own, and thought processes of your own that are toxic.

Maria Ross 16:37

Well, that's what you know, reading the book, it's, it's hard to read because I, you know, as I'm reading, I'm doing all the things and then like a paragraph later, you're sayin, this is what the response probably is from white women. And by the way, it's so funny, because most of my life, I'm the granddaughter of Italian immigrants, all four of my grandparents are from Southern Italy. And I didn't feel white. When I was younger, I wanted a white name, I want it. So, it's just really funny. I'm like, no, but I am white. I'm European, like, you know, so all these realizations came to me while I was reading this book, and also, the reactions, the instant defenses that go up. And the book caused me to start questioning the

defenses. And even when I thought I was with it, for what, you know, for a while for several pages, I'd get to something that would be like, ah, I don't know about that. And it's like, what, wait sit in that. And why does that make you angry? Why does that make you uncomfortable? So, the book is really, I think eye opening for people. And like you said, reading the book, and then watching the documentary is probably a good flow for people. But we have to be humble enough to say, how can you argue with this, these two women are sharing their experiences their truth. And it doesn't matter if any of us sit here and say, well, that's not me, or that's not how I act. We're, we're still part of that system. We're still marinating in that soup. And we're still benefiting from it. And that's the thing i Another thing I wanted to ask you, because it blows my mind. And I'm not trying to do it like those white women. But I feel like there's so many of us that are going to support this work and support anti racism. And then, you know, you look at the voting numbers. And it's like, what are you? What are what are you doing? Like, what why do you think that all these women talk the game are all of us, I'm going to put myself I mean, even though I make the votes, and I you know, I've made those selections. Why is it that when it comes down to voting or supporting candidates or supporting legislation, it falls apart for white women? What's what's, what are you thinking on that?

Saira Rao 18:49

White women overwhelmingly in the numbers don't lie, choose whiteness over everything else over gender over their children? I mean, whiteness is to largely be blamed for the gun violence. Who what what kids by and large look, everyone's getting shot all the time. But it's it's largely white kids in fairly affluent schools being murdered by white boys or young white men. That's what's happening. So, when white women go and you know, in famously in 2016, it was what 52 53% of you voted for Donald Trump. It went up after he actually showed you what a fascist he is. Right went up right? To 56%. So, you're consciously voting for whiteness. And so, our entire pedagogy Regina and I are first of all consciously black and non-black women of color, black and model minority, what is a foundational tool of white supremacy dividing and conquering us? So, Regina and I are not supposed to be on the same team. We're supposed to be fighting each other. And we're saying no, we're not doing that. And what we're saying is white women stop capping for whiteness, and join our intersectional gender You know, solidarity, and it all goes away. If White women chose Regina and I over whiteness, the entire nightmare of America would be over, it would be over. Why do you think, Maria, that Fox News has done a five-minute hit piece on us recently declaring that deconstructing Karen is the equivalent of Pearl Harbor, they don't care about Regina, and I could care less about us. It's you. And what they're seeing now is Oh, my God. Like, it's a New York Times bestseller this book there, these white women are reading this book, and they're loving this book, go look at the many, many, many reviews we have on Amazon right now. Five stars, five stars, five stars. Many, many, many people are watching the documentary, same thing. My God, if this is true, if white women stop, they're finished. The whole bit, it's finished. That's the kind of power you all have, because of your white skin.

Maria Ross 21:02

And so is the goal with what you're doing to try to get white women to get on the same page, if there are white women who are not supporting those candidates or not listening to those narratives is getting us to speak up and have those conversations with other white women.

Saira Rao 21:19

Yes, yes, yes. So, what you can't do so look, check this, the Department of Homeland Security. I was at the World Trade Center on September 11 2001, by the way, so I left my apartment as the model minority and I came home as a terrorist. That's how fast it changed. In the course of a day, Department of Homeland Security was created to criminalize people who look like me. That happened and everybody who looks like me became a crime. January 6, that was you those were your people? Did you guys get penalized or criminalized after that? No one's really even Donald Trump is running for president again. But you all are so unique, and not a monolith. You're not all not all. Not all. So, you guys get to commit a terrorist attack on the Capitol live streamed. We all watched it live. And you're not you're not those white women. You're not those white women. Meanwhile, I'm Mohammed Atta. Right like that. That's literally how this works, right? And so, when you all say, well, I'm not one of the the women who voted for Trump, I trust me, you know, plenty of white women who are Republicans who are openly racist. You all need to start working on your sisters. That's it. Instead of exceptionalism yourself the amount of energy white women spend time, money and energy that white women spend to say, not me, use that energy to go turn other white women, your neighbors, your your kids, friends, parents, teachers, get to work instead of patting yourselves on the back, you know, putting black boxes in your Instagram account, start turning other people in your community, because we can't, we can't, you can.

Maria Ross 23:00

Right. Oh my gosh, one of the quotes you had in the book were was if you cannot see color, you don't see white power. And if you don't see that you don't see your racism. And if you don't see racism, you can't dismantle it. So, what does dismantling racism look like? We talked a little bit about that just now in terms of having those hard, honest conversations, turning, you know, turning other white women over helping them understand the truth and understand the system that we're swimming in. What else does dismantling racism look like to you?

Saira Rao 23:34

I think the most important piece is that you all start racializing yourselves. You can't do anything until you do that. So, what does that look like? On a good day, I'm brown or I'm Asian, or I'm South Asian or Indian. That's not normally what I'm called. I mean, Google my name, go to Twitter and Google my name it is really next level. Same with Regina. She's called Black or African American on a good day. Y'all are just people, you're just people, right? And if you're just people, you're you don't see yourself on the that's the that's the norm system. That's the norm. It's not just norm. It's not just the norm. You don't see yourself as racial players. And if you don't see yourself as racial players, you are allowed to not see your, how your racial oppressors. So, the big here, and lots of white people ask this is what's next. What's next start with this. You'll say my Indian friend, my black colleague, my white friend, my white colleagues, my kids, white friend, my kids, white teacher start with that. It is a lot harder than you think. And once you get in the habit, I never and by the way, I used to be a white woman trapped in a brown woman's body. Like this is six years in the making. I'm 48 this started at 42 Like anyone could do this, right? I can't even think of the last time that I haven't said white person. My kid's white teacher like it's now set. It doesn't even occur to me to not say that, and then you know where everything falls, but you'll get looks. People will stop even doing this very tiny shift. People will stop speaking you. Who cares? That's the thing is you all are so scared of your own shadow the world is literally falling apart. In we are in a fast march to fascism. This is not like a moonwalk. This is a full-blown sprint of fascism. And

you all are so scared of saying white people out loud. Like, think about that. Like it. Meanwhile, you're the same people who like, if I was around during chattel slavery or Nazi Germany, I'd be one of the please. Whatever it is you're doing right now is what you would have been doing right back then, which I'll say for the vast majority of you is zero.

Maria Ross 25:43

How do you, you know, obviously, you have a specific approach that you and Regina are taking with, with tackling this issue and with the anti-racism that that you're trying to accomplish? And the way that you're the way that you're fighting the fight? What do you think about those, and I've talked to some of those folks on my show, black, brown and white people that specialize in in all facets of diversity, equity and inclusion, where they talk about creating a safe space to have these conversations and creating psychological safety. What do you think of that? Is that sort of a waste of time? Is that just coddling people? Or do you try to make the dinner psychologically safe? Or you're not trying to make them on psychologically safe? Like what do you think of that when you hear those that talk from people that are that are supposed to be fighting the same fight?

Saira Rao 26:39

So first of all, our dinners are totally safe spaces we've never known. I mean, contrary to what Fox News says, We don't like drunk people and flog them and drag them into the room. They're free to leave. But we also didn't we chat, we changed all the names of everyone in the book. Because you're all the same. And we never if you and people have done this, people have actually done this, go read my very robust Twitter feed, or Instagram and Regina is as well, we never named anyone one time you're in. So, here's what I think Maria, I think that white supremacy is not the you know, the table or the house. It's the air. It's the sun, it's the moon. Last time I checked, being nice and creating psychological safe spaces have not eradicated racism. All that being said, I would never shade any black indigenous or brown person doing any kind of equity work. Because it takes all kinds. It takes all kinds. And it needs to be fought from every single angle. Yes. And have at it, whatever. However, you think it's going to work for you and you know, your people in your life better. Great. Have at it. This happens to be what we do. You know, is it is it the end all be all? No, this is just this is one two-hour dinner. This is one book, you read the book, your dick. It's finished now, like the movie is 72 minutes. Like, this is just one thing. And we know we're doing something because it's taken off without literally with us doing anything, right? I mean, it's really, and so people are starting to think in ways that are different. And even haters, people who came into this, like thinking I did a podcast two weeks ago with a white woman who said the cover of the book made me mad. The first 20 pages made me mad and she said somewhere around page 40 I realized that this is a gift of love. This is like the kindest book I've ever read in my entire life. And I'm like, Yeah, so like, yeah, people were having it there. They're doing a bit of a one ad array. All right, because it's not what they thought it was.

Maria Ross 28:41

Well, your mission is noble. I mean, your mission is about creating harmony and creating equity. And so, it's not like a mission to like grift off people or you know, do that which brings me actually to my next question. I really loved the points you were making around the wellness and, and holistic health and empowerment culture. And a lot of the people that talk about the in the coaching industry, the wellness industry, the coaching industry, and how it's steeped in toxic positivity. Lisa wrote in the book so much

of the white life coaching self-help wellness industry requires that white women feel inadequate within the current systems. It relies on our being oppressed but doesn't allow us to see the ways in which we oppress. These programs are not centered in abolition and decolonization rely heavily on the trauma of white supremacy culture, and reactivate it with more white supremacy. So, there's there's lots of influencers out there that talk about ending racism that talk about you know, anti-racism, equity. But what's your take on this? Because obviously, you guys are calling this white supremacy trauma. And who does it impact?

Saira Rao 30:01

Yeah, I mean

Maria Ross 30:02

I guess a lot in there I just, I just like whatever your thoughts are.

Saira Rao 30:05

I'll sort of give you my my, my brain splatter. Um, first of all, we are called Grifters all the time. And I think that's really funny because America, white America is the greatest gift of all time white people came here, they killed, committed genocide against indigenous people and stole their land. They kidnapped and committed genocide against African people and then built a whole class economy on the backs of chattel slaves, chattel slavery. So, for white people to say that a black woman and a South Asian woman and by the way, the history of Asian Americans here is pretty horrible, you know, for them to say that US charging money is a grift is amazing. And the reason they say this is that it doesn't matter if we're charging \$5 million, or a penny, it's too much, because white people think that you're doing us a favor by doing this work. So, we should be paying you. Right? So just like let's start with that, in terms of the wellness industry. So, you know, white supremacy culture and we dig deep in this in the book is perfection based, you all have to be perfect. And that that resonated a time that part by definition, it's impossible, it is impossible. So, you will always feel lesser than you will always feel like a failure. So then enter all of these white gurus and these white, you know, wellness people, to teach you how to like girl boss your way into being perfect. It's you It's you. It's this individualism of You, yourself are responsible for feeling like shit. And you yourself are response, it's not white supremacy, culture is responsible for you feeling like shit. But so, pay us all of this money. And we will get you all the merchandise the girl boss, you know, no must say y'all spiritual gangster shit, you can dreadlock your hair, you can do the NAMA stay salute, you can speak in broken Sanskrit. And this is going to make you feel so much better, and you feel so much worse. So, then you keep paying, and you keep paying and you keep paying. And that's a great I mean, that's the ultimate grift. So completely, it's a trillion-dollar business, right? Half of it is cultural appropriation, with yoga, etc, etc. And so it's really meant to continue to perpetuate what it's just it's grifting off of white supremacy culture to make you feel like worse and worse and worse, and us keep paying more and more and more.

Maria Ross 32:33

Yeah, that was that was really powerful to read that. And also, it got me thinking about, you know, that collective move of our country, and I'm not really a collective move, it's always been there. It's been the foundation of our country, this individualistic approach, not a communal and a community-based approach of if everyone's doing well, we all do well. But this idea of putting the onus on the individual,

while I support that, in certain arenas, think about the people they're telling this message to. So, when you're telling that message to someone privileged and white, yeah, maybe they can do something about it. But you're going to try to tell Black, Brown Asian people who are already living in oppression, that it's their fault, they're living in oppression. And if that we just pay you \$5,000 Of course, you use your you know, even I do a podcast with a friend of mine, that's more about like, women finding their voice and you know, you have a voice use it. And even after reading your book, I'm like, Yeah, but some people can't like it's literally dangerous for them to use their voice. Exactly. It's making take pause on all this. All this rhetoric that initially, we thought was a good thing. And really, when you do when you deconstruct it, it's not it's a little nefarious, well,

Saira Rao 33:50

Individualism is colonial behavior, right? Colonialism, white supremacy behavior. And so, you know, I would say the COVID response every oh my gosh, look at that. Look at that, like how little how little both parties Democrat, Biden and Trump, right. But how little concern we had for other we are each other people vote for each other, how little we care about each other. And look at how much mass death it's a genocide. By the way, this is a genocide that's happened globally, but we could just talk about the United States, and now mass long term disability. So, then the question is, how does white supremacy hurt white people? COVID That's a great example of gun violence. Great example. And we are so focused on me, me, me, me, me. And we just like and this is colonialism. So that's part of also Dei, you know, is in diversifying your workforce if you're not decolonizing space, just air dropping black and brown people into your white supremacy colonized cultures horrible, which is why what happens is we see people come in and people leave.

Maria Ross 34:59

Exactly. Because they check the box and they have the pretty pie chart on their recruiting materials. Yeah, exactly. But then those people don't feel safe in that environment. They don't feel welcome. They don't feel like their voice matters. And so that's where include like, coming in. And yeah,

Saira Rao 35:14

I mean, I worked in corporate America, and it was horrible. And it's I worked in nonprofit, I mean, I've done all of it. Right. And I checked all the boxes, you know, they look great. And it was, it was an awful experience. And I mine wasn't an unusual thing. Very common.

Maria Ross 35:30

Yeah. And, you know, that's what we've talked a lot on the show with a lot of the diversity, equity and inclusion and belonging, experts that have been on and speaking about empathy. You know, I remember writing this in the book in 2019, which was, you know, empathy, there has to be genuine empathy there for diversity to even work. Because otherwise diversity is just a bunch of different people sitting around a table, second guessing each other and not liking each other and misunderstanding each other. Unless there's a true ability to connect and listen and say, okay, what are the systems around us that are supporting this behavior? Yeah, maybe we start in our organization, but hopefully that ripples out into larger society. But that's where you know, you get them, you get them hiring, diversity hires, this has been a common complaint of the folks that I've had on my show. And then those people don't belong there. They experienced microaggression after microaggression equity, yeah,

which is not a microaggression we have, which is not and I love that you define that in the book, their micro aggression is not micro, there's no doubt about it. Now, but

Saira Rao 36:35

You know, a good example of this, like a sort of macro example. This is Rishi Sunak, who's the new Prime Minister of the UK. Right? Host cologne. I mean, for an Indian guy, you know, his parents were probably born into British colonialism. And Rishi Sunak is to just give you a sense of how crazy this stuff is. I tweeted, Rishi Sunak is white supremacy and brown face, and I would rather have my white supremacy straight up in white. Right? And he said, trans women are not women. He wants to deport Rwandan refugees. Yes. He voted for Brexit. Right. And so, a black woman journalist at Channel Four in the UK, which is, you know, their public broadcasting?

Maria Ross 37:15

Yeah, my husband's from Scotland. So, he's been following that whole storyline. And he's like, you know, I was like, Oh, is this a good thing that this Prime Minister got elected? He's like, no,

Saira Rao 37:24

No, it's not so bad. So, she was doing a story on Regina and I, we did an hour long interview over zoom. She's in London, we're in the US. And I she reads this tweet of mine. And I say this thing about Rishi Sunak. Long story short, this is the liberal public broadcasting channel in the UK, for white bosses killed the story. Because I said that no way. And she calls me and she's like, this has never happened before. So, to give you a sense of how much silencing is going on right now of our work, like we're being literal, global silencing, because what we're doing is actually, if it works in masses, if it works in masses, it is all over. It is all over. You're disrupting the power structure. And these people will lose power, all of it. But so that's what's so interesting is No, I don't Rishi Sunak is no great gain. And that's that's a great I mean, that we you see, black, indigenous and brown token people in positions of power all over American companies. It doesn't make me feel good to see these Indian bro tech assholes running these companies who are jerks and inflicting harm on everybody. That's not good.

Maria Ross 38:35

Right? Well, they're fitting themselves into the system of oppression. So, they're like, well, I don't want to be I don't want to be oppressed. So, I'm going to become the oppressor. And I find that really interesting. Again, we're talking about you know, as as the granddaughter of immigrants, I find it fascinating that the groups that are that over time, if you look at history of like the late 1800s, and then the first wave of immigrants that came to the United States in the 1900s 1910s 20s, my family came over and like the 1910s, how those groups are marginalized. They experience all kinds of oppression, and all kinds of prejudice. And then as soon as they get a little bit of standing, they step on the next group that's coming. And I've had conversations in my family of, you know, when you're, you know, some offshoot relatives being crazy on Facebook and talking about the border wall. And I'm like, our grandparents immigrated to this country, and what you hear back is like, but they did it legally. And I'm like, well, it was easier than a no, also, immigration policy hasn't always been racist, right? Like, that's right. Okay. But just even like, and you're and I'm like, you know, that our family experienced. Prejudice I had my grandfather was actually put in an orphanage when he was a baby, because his mother passed away when they came to the States. And they didn't think Italians could raise their own children,

especially men on their own. So they put him in an orphanage and he was bitter about it his entire life. But, and then as soon as you get a taste of of the good life, as soon as you get a taste of success, now you're oppressing the next group of people, and I don't understand how they see themselves in those people. And what is it that makes them like, and I know that this is the point you're making about white women too, in the book, where it's like, we're learning from the best we're learning from white men about how to oppress. And so we do it to women of color. And we don't and we, you know, we say, wait your dinner and we say, all of the

Saira Rao 40:30

Asian Americans do it to black people.

Maria Ross 40:32

Exactly.

Saira Rao 40:33

I mean, it's, it's, but that it's

Maria Ross 40:35

But why think that is? What is what is the thing that turns someone from being instead of being empathetic and trying to make it easier for the next group? What is it? What's your theory? What is it about us?

Saira Rao 40:46

It's power? Yeah, all of us what power we all want proximity to power, that is the natural human instinct. It is the it is individualism, you know, on steroids. That's why colonialism ultimately, well, you know, post, we're gonna, we're all gonna die here from this, right? We're all basically in a hunger game situation. Culturally, that's what this is. That's what white supremacy patriarchy capitalism is. It is Hunger Games. We're all in competition with each other. And you get a running start based primarily on your skin color, but then the intersections thereof, right? So white men, able bodied white men, you know, we know we there's all its there's all this stuff, right? But generally speaking, white men are at the top and you're right, one rung behind below them, propping them up, and stepping on everyone else. And we're all on this hierarchy to win the game to win the game. That's all it is. And once you see it, for what it is, and once you see your role in it, like really is is buying that second house is like affording you know a season pass or whatever it is to Barry's Bootcamp and getting to walk into Lululemon and buying whatever you want and going to the the 15th Horrible holiday party with the same horrible people having the same lame Converse like stupid conversations. Is that worth what you're doing with your life? Is that worth being silent in the face of oppression? Is that worth being an oppressor? I have decided? No, it is absolutely not. And I guess I can't understand why more people can't get that. And what our work is doing Maria is it is waking up other people to doing that. We've I can't tell you how many women have contacted us saying they're in the process of leaving their husbands once they started down? Oh, wow. Because they're no longer going to play with the patriarchy. We've had a bunch of white women do our programs who have said it's been the first thing that to help them kick their eating disorder. You know, this is like, this is what you empower people in one area, it's like, once you realize rates, that perfectionism like it was someone famously said a black woman famously said If

white women spent even a fraction of the time trying to end racism as they tried to lose weight, we would have been done with this shit centuries ago. And that's it. It's true. Once you realize that you've been programmed right to be the skin. You see these 50-year-old women walking around like skin and bones like they haven't eaten in decades. What to be skinnier than next door, Molly, it's so sad. It's so pathetic, actually, when you start seeing your life. And the same goes for business. By the way, we you are asked me early on about business incorporation. It's all the same, right? So, I think this this fake, we live in capitalism, we live in really horrible, violent capitalism. So, there is no difference between companies and home life. It's all the same, right. And it's funny because I've started getting on LinkedIn, which I think is a riot because the amount of white men who come on my LinkedIn and they're like, this is not the place really. So, your let me get this straight. You can't talk about racism at the dinner table, which means you also can't talk about it at the lunch table or breakfast table. And you also can't talk about it at work, which means you can never talk about it. So that's like ultimate. So, if you can never talk about it, it just stays the way it is. Right. So, I think it's intellectually dishonest, which is a white euphemism for a lie to say that there's some perfect professionalism is white supremacy culture. Yeah, absolutely. The whole definition of what professionalism really means. So, I'd be interested to do we have I mean, we've had some major companies reach out and start conversations with us coming to do work, but they all like in big university, including my alma mater, University of Virginia have reached out we've had initial conversations and they basically come back and they're like, we can't we can't do it. Well, that's like

Maria Ross 44:42

That big scandal. I think it was last year and I'm Hope I'm quoting this right there was the company Coinbase that dismantle their entire diversity, the affinity group that had been started by employees because it would it had been started around the time of George Floyd and people needed a space to talk about these things. And they basically banned all political Will speech on any of their channels in any of the organizations, they fired their Head of Diversity and Inclusion after that person was brought into systematize. This group that it started up, and they said it was a distraction from work, and it was too divisive. Yeah. And I'm like, well, now you're showing your true colors. So, anybody that joins your organization now knows what they're getting into. And if they choose to sign on, because you gave them a really great signing bonus, then they're part of the problem as well.

Saira Rao 45:27

You know, it's too divisive, Maria, white people, when you say white people at Google, or you say, white people at, you know, Sherman and Sterling law firm, that's divisive, that's divisive. And so we are called divisive all the time, because we talked about white people. So again, you just, I think that this work, if you stick with it sincerely, you've read the book, you'll watch the movie, I would suggest even going back and reading the book, and having your friends read it and have conversations with actual, in real life conversations with people and ask earnestly, why won't you read this book? What is so scary about writing the book, once you start and have start having these conversations, it will blow your mind? The amount of peeling of the onions, you know, channel for banning or interview what like, in this woman's it's never happened before. You know, what is so scary. What is so scary, right? And you know that it's something very deep. And what's so scary is the end of patriarchal white supremacy. It's over what happens when white men are actually everyone's brought to the same level that's terrifying for the people who've been in power. So, here's

Maria Ross 46:36

I'm gonna, so here's where I get stuck. So, you have these conversations. And you all agree to do what like what what are. And I know, we're not going to sum it up in a 45-minute podcast conversation. But I do like to leave people with something actionable. So once once we see this, and we can't unsee it. What are some actions people can take in terms of like, whether it's in their workplace or in their community that are meaningful, because I know we talk a lot about performative, anti-racism. And you know, like, the social memes are great, but they don't do anything, they just make you feel better that you did something. So what are the real meaty, juicy ways that we can attack this problem? If we're not a CEO of a company? Or we're not? We're not in those positions of power? What are some things that you've seen the women from your dinners come out with? After they've had they have these conversations? Because my thing is having the conversations is great, but I don't also want to keep talking. I want to do something. Okay. Right. So this is also an people ask us this all the time and have a hard time with our response. Right? We didn't know. Yeah, I want the reset is for sure.

Saira Rao 47:48

That is your path. This is not, this is not a box checking exercise. So, I can talk about myself and other and white women who are actually and we've got lots of them, we've now been doing this for three years, we have hundreds of white women who we work with regular, that's by the way how our book took off so fast and furiously is because we actually work with real people who told all their friends to buy it all their friends to buy it. And all that is once you start your life, you will make different decisions every single day that you can't even quantify. So, I'll give you an example. I basically only, you know, Will, with exceptions, buy things at black and brown women owned companies. It's not like it just now I know where the black owned restaurants are where like, you know, South Asian owned restaurants, the yoga studio I go to and Richmond is owned by a black woman, like, those are the types of like things I only I'm not a big fan of electoral politics at this point. But I will still give donations to black, indigenous and brown progressive candidates anywhere. You know, those are, that's a major life shift decision. I basically no longer have the same friends that I used to have. Six years ago, I have a whole new community of people. We're our our values are the same. Our entire bond is anti-racism, anti-whiteness work. That's a huge change. I no longer we literally no longer socialize with like other couples, we don't do double dates. That's very white supremacy culture. My husband has some friends, I've got some friends, we have our own lives and we have our family, you know? So, it's hard to like, I don't know what that's gonna look like for you. Yeah, but your life will be your life will look radically different if you stay with us six years from now, right? And you're not gonna even know what that is because you're gonna have to go down your own rabbit holes. People say Who should I follow? Follow a ton of black indigenous, Asian, Latina women on all the social media platforms. You're not going to agree with everyone.

Maria Ross 49:46

Right, right.

Saira Rao 49:47

You know, I don't have the time agree with some of the stuff I say. You know and unlearning

Maria Ross 49:50

That's the thing. Yeah, it's it's having that humility of learning from those experiences and remembering

Saira Rao 49:56

learning and unlearning

Maria Ross 49:57

learning and unlearning and that you know, I I recently wrote a piece about the true story of thanksgiving through a podcast that from a podcast that I listened to and how I just because the truth is painful, it doesn't make it any less true. So, you can sit there with your hands in your ears and be like, well, I don't want to hear about that. I just want to have my pumpkin pie and my my turkey and like, have my kid do a Thanksgiving play at school and whatever. And that's the thing that those are the little things that the eyes are opening to the ears are opening to about, like, the more we can speak these truths to each other. And as you said, you may lose some friends along the way.

Saira Rao 50:40

You may lose your friends

Maria Ross 50:41

But that's okay.

Saira Rao 50:42

And you may lose your eating disorder. Like

Maria Ross 50:44

There's a lot to be gained.

Saira Rao 50:46

Yeah.

Maria Ross 50:47

Well, I'm not saying that's the other thing too, is that recognition that white supremacy and racism is detrimental to all of us. I had a guest on the show a few weeks ago. And he talked about the fact that they work. He's a he's a black man. And he works with a company called Soul focused, and they go in and they do talks and trainings with organizations with just community groups. And he talks about the fact that a lot of the time they're working with white people to help them understand that racism hurts you to you have been brought up in a in a toxic masculine culture as a white male, to like, squelch your feelings and to act like you know, all the answers, and it's killing you inside. So, everything impacts everyone. It's not just a black, brown, Asian, trans.

Saira Rao 51:35

It's bad for everyone

Maria Ross 51:37

being in the same soup.

Saira Rao 51:38

The thing is, you'll just be like, I'll be safer longer than Regina. Like, right? There's that old saying from World War Two, like, first they came for the blacks, and I was silent. Then they came. They came for me. And so there was no one left to stand up for me. Yeah, and I know we don't have much time. But like in this in this world of okay, if we really want to kill everybody, except for the straight sis, able bodied white men. They'll kill each other as soon as that happens. I mean, it's, it's not. This is not a kind world to anybody. And, and at least, are people happy? Are people having really meaningful happy existences? All indicators say no. Zero, no. We live in a society without health care. There's food insecurity, there's housing insecurity, you know, the Colorado River is drying up places are on fire, like we have a big problem. And people are scared of calling other people in themselves white people. Like that's where we are right now. And all we're saying is, let's start feeling comfortable having these conversations, nothing, we're not going to be able to affect any change, until we start being honest with ourselves and each other.

Maria Ross 52:51

It's like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, as they say, I want to leave with a hopeful note and also your hope for the future. And I just want to read this from the book that really spoke to me stop aspiring to be an ally and good lord, stop calling yourself an ally, rather be an accomplice, a partner, a collaborator, a co conspirator. Anything but an ally. So, is that is that what gives you hope and keeps you going? Because it is very bleak. So, what is it that drives you? And what is it? What is that, that hope you keep burning alive? To continue doing this work?

Saira Rao 53:26

I was a white woman trapped in a brown body working on Wall Street. Okay, like, that's what I was doing. And here I am. So, if I can wake up, anyone can wake up, and my life. For all the loss what I've gained is liberation. What I've gained is freedom. What I have gained is a values-based existence. What I've gained is true friendship and true community. And I'm happier than I've ever been in my entire life. So, if I can do it, anyone can.

Maria Ross 54:00

I love it. Thank you, Saira, for your time today. Your insights. We could probably talk for two more hours but trying to keep the podcast tight. But everyone, please check out the movie deconstructing Karen, check out the book called white women everything you already know about your own racism and how to do better that Saira co-wrote with Regina Jackson, and check out Race2dinner as well. Sara, where can folks best connect with you and find out more about your work

Saira Rao 54:27

www.race2dinner.com. And the two is the number two. Everything is right there.

Maria Ross 54:32

And we'll have all your links to the book to the movie to the website in the show notes. So, check those out. Thank you again and thank you everyone for listening to another episode of the empathy edge

podcast. If you liked what you heard, please share it with a colleague or a friend. Don't forget to rate and review and in the meantime until our next amazing guest please remember that cash flow creativity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. Take care and be kind.