

Guilty Feminist - 265. Creating Our Own World with Kemah Bob and Mridul Wadhwa

<https://guiltyfeminist.com/episode/?episode=323>

Deborah Frances-White:

Please welcome Mridul Wadhwa.

Mridul Wadhwa:

Thanks. I actually have a "I'm a feminist but.." I had to work really hard to think of one because I'm such a good feminist. I'm a feminist but...I don't think a man's place is in my kitchen. In fact, I'm so bad that my husband is meant to take care of dinner tonight, and I gave him so many instructions that he will not be cooking in my kitchen tonight. So yeah, I don't think a man's place is in my kitchen.

Deborah Frances-White:

You have given him so many instructions. He's like you just need to do it yourself, you don't trust me.

Mridul Wadhwa:

My children will be eating other foods, not foods that's in my kitchen.

Deborah Frances-White:

Is he just ordering them a pizza off Deliveroo because your instructions are so frankly, fascistic?

Mridul Wadhwa:

Yeah.

.....

Deborah Frances-White:

So Mridul, I am extremely interested in your work in Scotland. You were born in India, but you migrated to Scotland. What made you start wanting to work in women's services?

Mridul Wadhwa:

I don't think there was a time. So for any migrant listening. We have two here actually, including me, are three of us. It happened not to deliberately. When I graduated, I did a Masters at Edinburgh University, there was a job going at Shakti and I just completed a masters in training. And they needed someone to do some training. It wasn't by design. I just applied for this job, it looked interesting. Obviously, I had been around violence. I grew up in a home with domestic abuse. I'd experienced violence as a transwoman in India. And so it looked like somewhere I wanted to work. And I applied and I got the job. And I just stayed. Like before working in women's services, I used to teach people how to sound American in India, in a call centre. So it is not by design that I got into this work. But I stayed by design because in fact, I moved back to India and then moved back again to work at Shakti Women's Aid.

.....

Deborah Frances-White:

How long have you been there now?

Mridul Wadhwa:

So I've worked in the women's sector now since 2005, so quite a few years. And when I worked at Shakti Women's Aid, you know, it was eye opening, not just to see an experience, like what does domestic abuse really look like, although I grew up in a home with domestic abuse, but to see that, to see what it looks like, in the Scottish context, and then the further marginalisation of minority ethnic women, particularly immigrant women, because, you know, the all the messages were and in at least in the early part of my career, you know, Scotland was the big name to talk about domestic abuse and sexual violence a little bit more openly and that sort of stepped out of women's organisations into a little bit more into the mainstream of the public sector.

And, you know, the message was, clearly leave your abuser, you don't have to live with this, there's help for you. And when immigrant women would hear that message and accept that as that we were speaking to them, but when they came out and asked for help, they wouldn't have received it because particularly, Kemah just listening to what you were saying earlier, you probably have no recourse to public funds. And so many of those women with no recourse to public funds would not get any support, because their immigration status would stop them from accessing a homeless accommodation, refuge spaces, welfare, all the things that you need to leave a relationship, those really practical basic needs, that most women who are not subject to immigration control can access.

And while there are some exemptions, there's something called the domestic abuse rule. For most migrant women, that is not acceptable. And with Brexit, and with, you know, the rules changing for EU nationals, I'm really afraid that we will see more and more women who don't meet the immigration criteria who may not have completed or a client pre settled status, who will now be denied because their immigration status, disallows them from accessing public funds, which means housing benefit, which means Jobseeker's allowance, all of these things that you might need if you leave, because many women who leave end up being homeless, they end up either not being in employment or losing employment because they've left abusive relationships.

So my work in Women's Aid in the early years of my career was around raising awareness about this and it really transformed me. But I also found a real group of wonderful, and mostly immigrant women of colour, working to change this, and many of us still are, even like 15, 16 years later. But also many of us were qualified to do other things with our lives. But we couldn't find those, you know, a space and those careers that we trained for, because of racism, really, and found ourselves in this organisation. So it's a real interesting journey how many of us got there. And for me, it was just luck and coincidence, but it changed my life completely.

Kemah Bob:

I love it. I don't know what it is gets me like so excited. And a bit of chills because like, we can make plans. Yeah. But I feel like plans like rules that often made to be broken, shifted, switched up. I wonder if you could have planned, you know, a life so beautiful. And it sucks

that you would, like kept out of you know, what you hoped to do? But what you find yourself is making such an impact?

Mridul Wadhwa:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, as a transwoman, I think the only plan I had was to be alive, for a long time was, you know, I did not want to die. And so anything that has come after that is a real gift, and a surprise. And I think like for me, like I'm a huge fan of the Guilty Feminists, and you cannot imagine how excited I've been to be here. And I was like, I was saying to some of my colleagues, like, I think I may have taken up this job just so that I could get on the guilty feminists.

Deborah Frances-White:

It's really powerful story that sometimes when you're marginalised, and you're not being given access to spaces you do want to be in you end up helping other people who are also excluded from spaces. But then ultimately, that can be the most fulfilling thing any human being could do.

Mridul Wadhwa:

Yeah.

Deborah Frances-White:

Because you are clearly very engaged and energised by your work now, you clearly love it, you know, and as well, as I assure I'm sure, wishing there was no need for it.

Mridul Wadhwa:

Yeah.

Deborah Frances-White:

But you clearly are very... this is, you know, something that you have found great purpose in understandably, the Shakhti Women's Aid Centre, you were working with black and Asian women, and then you move to Rape Crisis, Scotland on the national helpline. What were your experiences there?

Mridul Wadhwa:

Well, the helpline is a really incredible place. It is really still hard in our society today to talk about sexual violence. And the ability to contact somebody and speak anonymously is the very important, sometimes first step, or sometimes the only step to talk about your experience of sexual violence. And then it takes a huge amount of courage to do that, to talk about what's happened to you, or even actually, question whether what happened to you was abuse or not. I think we are still a society that is still not very good at talking about sexual violence, particularly sexual violence, that is not rape. Because, you know, like, although I work in every crisis centre, people think that only if you've experienced rape, can you seek support, but actually, I think if you've been harassed on the street, you should be seeking support around this because it's, you know, like, there is no hierarchy of violence. It's the impact that we are interested in, and we provide services.

So the helpline is that these where people phone, either, because they're questioning whether what's happened to them is sexual violence, whether sometimes often you will hear

people talk about whether they are worthy of our time as workers who worked on that helpline, or will work in Rape Crisis Centres or women say like, is this abuse? And the more and marginalised you are in our society, the more harder it is for you to get that answer. Like (a) the answer is, that is what happened to me abusive because there's this whole intersection of being either trans or non binary or black or brown or disabled, because there are so many other acts of violence that are perpetrated against you on an everyday basis. And then if sexual violence is part of that abuse, is this something that I can seek help for.

And I love the people I worked with on the helpline, I still have a really, really strong relationship with them, I host their pop quiz (?), twice yearly pop quiz, and it's real fun. But they are the most wonderful, warmest, kindest women I know. And it is a huge honour to have worked with them. So I used to train people who worked in the helpline but also, to know that when anybody who phones because it's open to anyone who lives in Scotland, to use the helpline, they will be received and held and respected for whatever they're thinking around their experience of sexual violence. It truly is non judgmental, and when we say and more services will say that they are non judgmental, and I would believe that they are, but I know that the spaces I work in currently and the National helpline for Scotland is a really non judgmental space. You will be heard, you will be given time you will be given space, there will be no pressure on you to report your experience to anybody, like you know, there's sometimes there's this fear that sometimes survivors, and that's a term we use on the helpline or in the Rape Crisis movement in Scotland, think that they must report what happened to them like there is no pressure to do that.

Sexual violence is the loss of control. And everything that happens after that in terms of your recovery, only you can control. That is your right, I think that's the gift that we must give ourselves if we've experienced sexual violence, because the abuser has taken away that control. Everything that happens after that should be yours. It's your story. And we recognise that within our services. And that's what that helpline is like. And in fact, that's what a Rape Crisis Centre is like as well, the one that I work in right now, these are beautiful spaces.

Kemah Bob:

That's so beautiful. Yeah, complete and not have to be worried that you'll be told what to do, or how you should proceed.

Mridul Wadhwa:

How you should be even, because you can be however, as a survivor. It is your story, and only your story.

.....

Deborah Frances-White:

How did that shift when you went away from the National helpline? So you were, instead of talking to people on phones, you then start managing the Forth Valley Rape Crisis Centre.

Mridul Wadhwa:

I think managing a Rape Crisis Centre takes you a little bit away from that frontline work. But it's so valuable to hold those stories, the stories of triumph and recovery. I think it's very important to know that the women's movement in Scotland and I would say the wider United

Kingdom has been set up, its history lies in survivors, it's survivors set up these centres, mainly, and we volunteer, we staff them. So how our services are designed and organised really are centred around survivors voices and survivor experiences.

Managing a Rape Crisis Centre is about making sure that the feminist ethos of equality, of inclusion, of love and kindness towards each other, who those of us who work and volunteer there, are central. But then we are functioning in a very patriarchal world. And my main role is to ensure that those feminist ideals are maintained. But the reality is that to maintain that we need money, and we need to be sustainable organisations. We need to be sitting at a table with our various partners and stakeholders. And funders will often speak a different language in terms of how they view their role in ending sexual violence. It's often a little bit different to ours.

Deborah Frances-White:

Can I ask what the attitude is like from those positions?

Mridul Wadhwa:

I think there's like, over the years, and certainly right now in Scotland, I think there's a genuine desire and commitment to do better. But then if you are from the police, or the health service, or any other big national, or the local authority or local council, you're bound by those patriarchal structures, because you know, like those, those organisations were not made by women, for women, or people for diverse gender identities, we just happen to have muscled our way in. And but we are still functioning within those patriarchal systems.

So their ability to respond in the way that we as Rape Crisis Centres want them to respond (a) give us more money, sustainable funding, be more flexible in how you offer particularly health services and so on. That takes longer. And also, you know, Scotland is a much smaller country to the rest of the United Kingdom. So I can speak for Scotland, I think we have a much more in my experience a much more closer relationship with decision makers, and maybe you do in England, and also you have a more challenging government in Westminster whereas we have a slightly more left leaning government here.

.....

Deborah Frances-White:

Probably, I feel like the nature of those bodies might be the idea of like reducing, or like making things go away, rather than understanding, trying to understand the complexities of these issues.

Mridul Wadhwa:

There is in Scotland, certainly, we have a national trauma framework, and we have big, big public organisations, you know, authorities, public bodies, trying to make their workforce more trauma informed and the benefits of that will be felt in the coming years.

But to go back to your original question about what is it like to manage? I think there is a real tension between our ambitions of keeping Rape Crisis Centres inclusive or safe, well resourced spaces. So the biggest challenge I have is resourcing. So that is funding that is sustainable. We are often victim across, I think this is true across the United Kingdom, to

short term funding. So it's not like rape and sexual violence is going to go away in two years. But yet many of us are funded in a year's contract. It's rare to see, like 5, 10 year funding. And a lot of our funding comes, in Scotland certainly, we have much more funding from the government and local authority than I would say our sister organisations down in England and Wales.

And that is positive, but we have massive waiting lists, like Edinburgh rape crisis centres waiting list was closed for a year, during the pandemic, like we were not taking any referrals at all. We are now and we just received some additional money from the Scottish Government to tackle waiting lists. And I think it really helps to have a feminist leading our government.

Deborah Frances-White:

What's that like. Tell us more about that.

Mridul Wadhwa:

So without being party political, I think there are a number of good feminists elected to the Scottish Parliament, including I would say the First Minister. If nothing, at least, they will listen to you, you have better and easier access to the challenges. And we've had survivors who have had meetings with Ministers and their local MSPs. And you, you actively, you see, women across parties, and the Scottish Parliament, you know, championing the cause of survivors of gender based violence. But sexual violence is really widely prevalent, sexual violence services have been historically underfunded in Scotland, so we are just playing catch up with our demand.

And I suppose this is what I'm talking to you about. This is the kind of work that someone who manages or leads a Rape Crisis Centre is having to do so by being really innovative and making sure that my colleagues have everything that they need, whether it's skills, or the emotional space, and their own well being to be able to work with trauma. The other thing is to work to raise the profile of the centre so more survivors come to our centre, to seek support and know that it is a safe space. Particularly for me, what's important is those who are missing in our service user groups. So we have, we are largely mainly used by cis white women. And so the work ahead is about making sure that those who are marginalised in our society and further away from the cis white heteronormative existence also know that the space is for them. And I think continuing the campaign for more resources, reform of legislation, making sure that we don't have to take out a begging bowl everywhere we go. But that really is often a leader's job, the women's movement, I don't think I can have a conversation with anyone without asking for money, which of course I will be doing here too.

.....

Deborah Frances-White:

Two things you've said have really struck me. One is when you said just being alive as an ambition for a transwoman. And I've heard transwomen speak this way before. And I know many of our listeners will be feeling like it feels like a punch in the stomach to hear that, it feels like physically painful to hear. Oh, well, every year I'm alive is a year beyond what my expectation was. That this world is so violent towards transwomen. And we know the statistics are there. But also sometimes people deny those stats online and they do.

Sometimes they say, Well, not really because, and they, you know, you can make stats say anything.

But I think we all anecdotally know that if I'm going to get on a night bus tonight at one in the morning to get home from Soho, I might experience some harassment, I might experience some guys going Oh, show us your tits or you know, come over here darling. I might, and I am as a cis woman, always, as all women are on alert, especially at night, especially alone, you know, but even walking home in the day, I'm just sort of, I'm hold on to my bag, I'm just at low level alert at all times, like out for danger. When I come into my flat and there's no one here I look around in every room. You know, every woman understands this. But I also know if a transwoman who does not pass for cis, and a transwoman never really knows you know, from my closest trans friends who pass for cis, they don't really ever know if they, you know, there's moments where there's a double take or you know, and the whole passing for is problematic in itself.

But to not get into that, to just stick on this topic of danger and violence in the world, if a transwoman gets on a bus, it's almost impossible on the night bus that they will not be. Jeering, cheering, catcalling, weird looks, double takes. whispering, giggling, sneering, sympathetic, nodding looks from progressive people who are trying to kind of be like, but I like trans people, there's not going to be a neutral response. And the more dangerous that buse is just because it's full of, you know, drunk people who are beyond the, you know, (Kemah Bob: drunk people are the worst.) Yeah, who are sort of out, you know, feel like they're outside the bounds of civility that they would maybe have in the day, or if a place was better lit, or you know, those kinds of things. We know that jeering and cheering and that whispering and that giggling can easily escalate into insults, which are structurally violent, which can easily escalate into pushing and shoving, which can easily escalate into violence. We've all lived in the world and we all anecdotally know this, but it is a more dangerous journey for a transwoman at home at night, that is not undermine or diminish for any of our listeners, the dangerous journey you may have had, and you may have every night, it doesn't diminish anyone else's journey.

But we must admit collectively, that it is more likely that a transwoman will come under fire and experience these very structurally violent constant flicks of eyes, and I don't know, oh, God, and aggressive glares. And that that can escalate into physical violence, and that that can escalate into sexual violence quickly. So I just want to say, as the owner of this podcast, I feel I need to say that in this space. I also know that there are many people who are concerned that if transwomen can self identify, and come into a refuge, that that may trigger all sorts of things in cis women. Have you come up against this?

Mridul Wadhwa:

Yes, I have. If you just Google my name, you will see evidence of what I've been going through for the last two or three years up in Scotland around this issue. I know you described a situation of a night bus, but actually for transwomen, even the day is dangerous. And I think it's important to acknowledge that because there is such a social licence to be awful to us. And there absolutely is. It really doesn't feel like there is any punishment or any reputement or anything, any consequences in most societies of this world, if not all if you harm a trans person.

And that was my experience growing up in India, I transitioned in India before I came here. And for the record I had, for those who are very interested in my, in what happens between my legs. Because that is what the mycology around me has been created. You know, as a wo.. transwoman who works in the women sector is that I don't have a gender recognition certificate, I have never transitioned and usually they want to know if I have a penis or not. All of that happened in India. And if you understood migration, you would know that I don't need a gender recognition certificate. Because I was a woman when I came here, I might be very successful. *[word unclear]*

But yes, there are these concerns, misguided, and downright dangerous. So between misguided and downright dangerous, there are a whole lot of opinions and feelings about self identification. I think it's really important for people to hear that trans people self-identified before it was a word in the cis lexicon. Like, I am a transwoman, and that is self-identification. But the state has decided to legislate, or, hopefully in Scotland, that doesn't look like it's happening in England anytime soon, to change the way we can change our birth certificate. That's all that's happening.

But every other experience that we have as transwomen, how we are trans people, and more broadly, how we engage with services, how we go about our life, everything works on a self-id basis, and it's already been working. It is fine. Are there trans people that are dangerous? Yes, there are just as men can be dangerous, and some women can be dangerous. Laws are made and they are broken. But we all know that that will happen. So just to suggest that a few individuals who happen to be trans might abuse legislation or spaces, women's spaces, doesn't mean that you excluded a whole community and secondly, men already harm women, because that's what they're really talking about. Men already harm women without going into women's spaces, or even if they, like they can go into women's spaces that they like.

And my argument is that men are already in these women's spaces, like, for example, a Rape Crisis Centre or a Women's Aid, because who is making the decisions about how much money we get. About who you know, who gives us planning permission, it is not women alone. So the argument that women's spaces will be somehow compromised, from my perspective as a strategic thinker, that's already happening, because we are functioning in a man's world. But to go into the very specifics about who gets access to these spaces, I think it should be reassuring that women's services are very private services, we often organise our services, and I can speak to Rape Crisis Centres in particular, that we organise them in such a way that actually when you use our service, you might never ever see another survivor, when you're in our building, or in our space, except maybe in our group. So I don't know, really, what the argument is, anymore. I think the argument essentially is from people is like, we refuse to see the humanity of transwomen in particular, as people, and we would rather that they're not here at all.

Kemah Bob:

Feels like a weird, hypothetical fear, like, just this lack of understanding, and oh, ignorance. Ignorance runs rampant.

Mridul Wadhwa:

I mean, some of the things that have been thrown at me I sort of already referenced, but I remember being in a meeting once where there is this person, who just the name of some transwoman who, you know, was accused of a crime somewhere in South Asia. And she asked the, you know, the representative of women's organisations, are you going to condemn this transwoman for carrying out an act of, I think it was sexual violence. And it was like, well, I would like to condemn all the men who commit acts of sexual violence by name and I will be here for the end of time. Why is it that you've never asked us to do that, you know, as women services, so what is this about?

Deborah Frances-White:

And when you before referred to men interfering in or getting somehow insidiously into women's spaces, you were referring to the accusation that if people can self-identify that a cisgendered man might go Ah I identify as a woman to gain the door? Presumably, that's what you were talking about, in terms of...

Mridul Wadhwa:

Yeah, that is right, because that's what they say. But also, like, that's how it started. And some might argue that that's what they're trying to protect, by not allowing self-identification laws to pass in this country, whether it's England and Wales or Scotland, But actually, if you really listen to them, and see who has the platform now, essentially what they're saying is that transwomen cannot exist. I have lived approximately half my life as post transition. And we feel like recently, in the last two, three years, people have started calling me a man, but this is what I have to say to them. Like it has no impact on me. Because even before I transitioned, when I went to an all boys Catholic school in India, no one ever called me a man. So if you think that it's some kind of gotcha, it isn't, because you know like, I've been called every name in the book to harass me, being called a man was never one of them. And it does not bother me. So you can fuck right off.

Kemah Bob:

I think like the idea of men, cis men being like, a woman to gain access to services. I mean, isn't the answer to that to make sure that men have access to services?

Deborah Frances-White:

I don't think that's what they're saying Kemah. They're saying, say the victim, or the survivor of the abuse, was in the refuge. They're not saying a man who is running from violence is going, I've got nowhere else to go, will you have me? They're saying that the violent husband of a woman who has sought refuge might say, well, you have to let me in because I'm a woman called Dave.

Kemah Bob:

Oh that's absolutely ridiculous. That's ridiculous.

Mridul Wadhwa:

But that's what some of them are saying. Because now what are they saying to someone like me is that I have no right to work in these spaces. Because no matter what I do, I can never be a woman. It has turned into this sort of whole biological essentialism. And as though there's only one kind of womanhood, but actually the more adjectives you have

before your name, the more different your womanhood. So it's, you know, like, if you are a transwoman, I am a transwoman of colour, who happens to be Zorashtian and Hindu. So all of those adjectives before me define a different type of womanhood. But if you listen to their argument carefully, and I've stopped at the moment, like I do not listen to it anymore, they say that there's only one kind of womanhood, but there simply isn't.

Deborah Frances-White:

Because I am an Australian, adopted, left handed, immigrant woman, that's a different experience from Keymah's, that's a different experience from yours, that's a different experience from another white woman who might live in my building. And those experiences are all unique, but I think...

Kemah Bob:

Valid and shouldn't be argued with.

Deborah Frances-White:

Yeah. And I want to address this because I know there'll be some people listening who will be, you know, having questions, and I want to be a good ally, and, you know, build bridges. Some people say I feel uncomfortable with that word "cis" that's sort of like, Oh, no, I have to have be cisgendered, and hold on, I'm just a woman, I don't want that. And I will be honest with the listeners and say when I first heard cisgendered women, I sort of felt the obligation to say it in certain contexts. I felt uncomfortable with it. I'll be absolutely honest. I was like, hold on a minute, now I'm changing what I am, now I need a little prefix. And then I realised and read up on the word heterosexual. And I realised that before the word homosexual there was no heterosexual, and homosexual was an invention of around the turn of the century, late 1800s, early early 20th century. People absolutely, of course, were like, I'm not heterosexual. I'm normal. And you know, homosexual is the deviance and that's an illness and I'm just me, I'm just sexual. But because the words heterosexual and straight were around before I was born, they are normal to me. They are completely in my lexicon they are how, well I don't identify as heterosexual anymore I identify as bisexual now, but that's part of that fluidity, of going Hold on a minute. And so as soon as I realised that I was like, this is just a word that wasn't around before you were born. This doesn't take anything from you. And I want to say that I was uncomfortable with it at first because I want people to go, you know, it's okay to be uncomfortable with things and think them through and then go, why am I scared of a word, like how does that rob me of anything?

Mridul Wadhwa:

Well, as you're building bridges, maybe I should put away the Goddess Kali that seems to have emerged as I'm speaking to you. Trust me. One of my favourite pictures if you Google Goddess Kali, the first Wikipedia picture, that's often me. I think it's important that there's a group of women that I'm really interested in, who are affected by this debate. And I say debate very generously because I don't believe it is. Debate is when there's equality of voices and respect. But this is about who has power and who doesn't.

But there are a group of survivors who will be watching and seeing what is being played out about spaces that they're potentially going to use. And be informed or misinformed about what actually happens here and be, possibly be fearful. And I think if you're worried about these things, about inclusion and what trans inclusion means within women's organisations,

and if your local women's organisation or Rape Crisis Centre or Women's Aid is openly trans inclusive, and you just don't understand, reach out to them and ask those questions. I think it's important to know that we see you as an individual. And we come as survivors with experiences that often feel to the outside world as holding prejudice. So we might have fear of men of a certain ethnicity, we might have fear of trans people, and it could be linked to an experience of trauma. I think it is, it is okay to hold those things as long as you are willing to acknowledge that, in support, we will accept that.

But there is a difference also when, and I am not sure if I said this as clearly and transparently as I want to, but I'm trying. Apologies, if I haven't done it well. But I think the other thing is that sexual violence happens to bigoted people as well. And so, you know, it is not discerning crime. But these spaces are also for you. But if you bring unacceptable beliefs that are discriminatory in nature, we will begin to work with you on your journey of recovery from trauma. But please also expect to be challenged on your prejudices, because how can you heal from trauma and build a new relationship with your trauma, because you can't forget, and you can't go back to life before traumatic incident or traumatic incidents. And some of us never, ever had a life before traumatic incidents. But if you have to reframe your trauma, I think it is important as part of that reframing, having a more positive relationship with it, where it becomes a story that empowers you and allows you to go and do other more beautiful things with your life, you also have to rethink your relationship with prejudice. Otherwise, you can't really, in my view, recover from trauma and I think that's a very important message that I am often discussing with my colleagues that in various places. Because you know, to me, therapy is political, and it isn't always seen as that.

Deborah Frances-White:

And any time we say, one person from this group, did this. Therefore, I can make an assumption about the actions, the future actions, of other people who share this identity. That is the definition of prejudice. It's pre judging. It's saying, Hey, I had this experience, or I saw this on television or I read this in the paper. And now I prejudice people, if this group is to be more likely to be violent, or predators or in some way or another, they might hurt me. So I need to exclude them. That is the definition of prejudging or prejudice. You are literally prejudging somebody based on something about their identity that they were born with, that they cannot do anything about. And you cannot glean any information about what somebody will be like, based on what somebody else who may have shared one characteristic with this person, but no others. And that is really, really important. Transwomen are more likely to experience violence, they're more likely to turn up to refuges vulnerable, and also fearful of what their response might be to them at the refuge.

Mridul Wadhwa:

More likely, but you know, like, I don't think they do, because of the environment we live in, like you know, while everybody else is questioning whether transwomen should be in the space, but actually transwomen have been questioning whether we are entitled to the space much before everyone was asking whether we can actually be there.

Deborah Frances-White:

Sorry, I didn't mean, I apologise. I didn't mean more likely to turn up. I meant, if they turn up they're more likely to be vulnerable and fearful of their response. Because if I turned up to a refuge, a women's refuge, in the middle of the night going, I've just had this terrible

experience, my expectation would be you would say, Oh, please come in, we'll take care of you. But I can imagine being trans and thinking I've, you know, I know what people say and I know that, you know, maybe this will be an inclusive space for me and maybe it won't. Maybe they'll say get out of here. And so this violence will be compounded by more structural violence.

Mridul Wadhwa:
Absolutely.

Deborah Frances-White:
We need a massive rethink as a society. And feminism needs a big old rethink on this because if we are not there to protect the most vulnerable members of our group, what are we there for. As you said before Mridul, there is a social licence to treat trans people very badly, to rule them out of employment, to speak in rude ways about them, and to them, for street harassment, there's a social licence, we need to revoke that licence. It is the job of feminism to revoke that licence, and to step up, and step forward and say, these people are our sisters, these people are our siblings, and we need trans people to be protected. And we take that first step today. And if we have some discomfort because of the power structures that raised us, and that evolved us and evolved our thinking, that are in themselves structurally violent, then we need to do that work on ourselves, to get more comfortable with doing the right thing, and protecting kind people who want a break and desperately need a break from our society.

Kemah Bob:
I think it's a moment to check your privilege. And I think we've gotten to an interesting place in society where we're acknowledging the structural inequalities that women face across the board. And I think it's a struggle for some people to acknowledge that someone's had to face something, perhaps even more challenging than you have. Because my life is the hardest. And I think it's such a cop out, I think we just have to do better across the board. And I know you were saying kind people, but also mean people, mean trans people deserve care too.

Deborah Frances-White:
I do think we need to get these conversations off Twitter and into rooms as soon as possible. I think, you know, Mridul, hearing your voice and looking into your eyes, it's very, very difficult to not have your humanity provoked. And on Twitter when you've got these 280 characters, and it's so flammable. And recently, there was a really violent, threatening tweet to JK Rowling. And I was like, This isn't helping. And it's not right. And I don't want that. And this is not to say that I don't understand how someone might be provoked to anger if society continues to not listen to their trauma.

But I want to say, I want to get these conversations off Twitter, because I think when we look into each other's eyes, and I understand that maybe very vulnerable for a lot of trans people, and I'm not suggesting for a second, trans people put themselves in rooms, with people who they fear because they've said structurally violent things. I'm not saying that at all. But I'm saying allies, if you are an ally, please find a way to build a bridge. And if you meet a transphobic person who is actively, if you meet somebody who's just going, I don't know about this, take the time to talk to them and make arguments. If you meet somebody who

goes Ah these things bother me, take the time to talk to them, do your research, don't just go Educate yourself. You're an ally, trans people can do that you cannot do that.

If you meet someone who is actively angrily transphobic and saying very, overtly violent things, please can I ask this, when you leave that person, leave that person at least no more transphobic than when you met them, online or off. Don't provoke and stoke that and pile on. In a way that gives them ammunition. Because you are not a trans person. This is not your anger. This is not your oppression. Your job is to build a bridge. And if you can see you will never build a bridge with this person, then, obviously, stand an ally and protect a trans person if they are piling on. But if you start flaming it and flaming and flaming it, you create a bigger community and a bigger army for them. So please, don't do that. Please use this podcast and the words of Mridul to build bridges and win people over because I do think it is simply a matter of activating people's humanity. And I think the vast majority of people are good, compassionate, people whose humanity can be ignited. Quickly.

Kemah Bob:

Allyship is hard work. I think that's such an important thing to acknowledge is that like, like, ally, like that's a verb. You know, like a lot of people want to treat it as a noun or something and stick on a t-shirt. But it's a verb and it's difficult, and it can be awkward if you're not used to having conversations like that. But it's important to remember that your life is not on the line, but your life is on the line, our humanity is on the line, you know, the soul of this planet is on the line. And injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere, you know, and so we have to stand for each other and with each other.

Deborah Frances-White:

If you're looking for another episode of the guilty feminists to give you ideas for how you might talk to people who are currently, you know, trying to figure this stuff out from a genuine place, then we did an episode with Travis Alabanza, and Kuchenga. That's absolutely amazing. So listen up to these episodes, and then have a think about how you might talk to people in your community circle about this, and even broach the subject with people because it's really easy to just go Ah I want to avoid this. And I've talked to a few people recently go, I just don't talk about it at all, because it's too flammable. And I'm like, I don't think that's making life better for transwomen getting on buses, or trying to get jobs. That's your job as an ally, you need to make it safer to get on buses and easier to get jobs. So is what you're doing, is the conversations you're having, is that gonna make the person you're talking to more likely to employ a trans person or less? Is it going to make them more glarey at a trans person on a bus or turning their cold shoulder at a party, or less? And that is always the metric by which you should ally in my opinion. I know it's hard sometimes I know you feel angry. Sometimes I know you get inflamed sometimes, but your job is not to pile on and push that person into a place of further transphobia and ignite people around them to close ranks and go, Hey, you're being so mean, I think we're going to set up this anti trans community over here. That is not your job.

Mridul Wadhwa:

And can I add, like if you're a lazy ally, give Edinburgh Rape Crisis your money.

Kemah Bob:

If you feel like what you're about to say is about to cause some harm, why don't you donate the money?

Mridul Wadhwa:

Yeah, I think it is the way forward. Conversations. And I mean, they have been happening. I've been part of a few but I think I've had enough for the moment. And you know, there's more to my life. But you know, I think it's absolutely vital, because you know, we're such a small community, and yet there's such a disproportionate focus on our existence at the moment in the UK, and probably in most other parts of the world.

Kemah Bob:

It's psychotic.

Mridul Wadhwa:

Like, just leave us alone and give us the few things that we're asking for: better healthcare, the ability to change our birth certificate without a bunch of probably men deciding on a panel whether I'm a woman or a man enough to get a different birth, like the birth certificate that says who I am. Like, these are small things. Don't make me wait for two or three years for my first appointment at a gender identity clinic. Abolish gender identity clinics, why can we not access healthcare in primary health care settings as trans people, like there are better and different ways. And there are lots of trans activists who can speak to this much better than me.

You know, until recently, actually until 2015. I didn't really talk about my transness in a sort of public way. I got given this award, and then I was like, My God, now I have to talk about it. Most of my conversations are about immigrant women and no recourse to public funds and how we need to abolish it. Because you know, Deborah, you were saying about, you would turn up at a refuge and people would just take you in. But if Kemah turned up, they wouldn't. That same refuge would probably want to see her passport and immigration status. You know, what if she hadn't flirted with the dodgy guy in the passport office? You know, like, but that is also a reality. Like there are so many groups who will be denied these services because of who they are. That should go. You really need to abolish no recourse public funds.

Deborah Frances-White:

Is there anything, Mridul, we can do to make it more likely in Scotland, or in England and Wales and Northern Ireland, that migrant women can access services?

Mridul Wadhwa:

Yeah, I think certainly in Scotland, while there are some real challenges with having no recourse to public funds, so I don't know if people will know what that is. But essentially, if you're subject to immigration control, then usually if you are from outside of the EU, it would be stamped on your biometric residence permit, it would say very clearly, it's a bit more ambiguous and confusing now for people from the EU who are living here, but essentially that means that you as an individual cannot access housing benefit, or any other benefit, including child benefit, even if your child is British. And those are things that you need to recover, or to get, like, restarted in a way if you're fleeing an abusive relationship.

But in Scotland, there are sections of the Children's Scotland Act, the Social Work Act that allow local authorities to support families, particularly families with children, women with children, or anybody actually, not just women, anyone with children, who need support from the state because they've been rendered homeless or destitute because of domestic abuse, or any other reason actually, and need help from the state. So that's the way around. And I think we need to pressure our local councillors, our MSPs, our Scottish MPs.

And, you know, there will be similar exemptions in England and Wales and different pieces of legislation. The local authorities can step in and offer support when people are destitute, good support, support that allows people to get back on their feet, or maybe even, you know, if they wish to, because you know, but of course, immigration is not a holiday as people would like us to believe that you can just pack up and go back to where you came from. Definitely not that. But if they wish to, if that's what they want for themselves, then at least so that is able to be done safely. But the best thing, and the easiest, and the cheapest thing that any state can do is to give migrants equal rights as all citizens, as all residents. But if we enshrine access to public services as rights given to residents as opposed to citizens of a nation, we will be a much healthier, happier place.

So write to your MP and tell them to campaign to abolish no recourse to public funds. It will make things easier, safer, better, and actually cheaper for the state, because it is more expensive to try and resolve problems that really have the solutions. But you have to find complex methods to get the same amount of 20 quid of child benefit, like if you could just get child benefit and save the hours and hours that Women's Aid workers Rape Crisis workers, social workers often, you know spending trying to get bits of money so that people are safe and can leave abusive violent situations, and they want to.

Deborah Frances-White:

Mridul, can I ask, where can we give money? What are you looking for here money wise, because it's...

Mridul Wadhwa:

What am I looking for? A lot of money. So it costs just over a million pounds a year to operate Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre. And if you don't have to have a waiting list, that figure almost doubles.

.....

More about money and donations, and a bit on Mridul's saris which are never washed.