

Episode 29: Centering Women - It's More Than Lip Service with Anne Price and Jhumpa Bhattacharya | Transcript

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ANNE PRICE: Hi, I'm Anne Price, President of the Insight Center and for this special episode, I'm sitting down with our very own, Jhumpa Bhattacharya, Vice President of Programs and Strategy. Hi, Jhumpa.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Hi.

ANNE PRICE: So let's start a little bit by talking about some of the challenges of 2019.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Mm-hmm.

ANNE PRICE: What did you see as some of the major challenges of last year?

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yeah, you know, it's interesting, I think one of the things that—I'll get into the challenges, this is actually talking about a high—but I think 2019, one of the things that stood out for me in 2019 is there was a lot of discussion in kind of the general public, and the public discourse, around elevating the voices of women, women of color in particular, both in politics and policymaking, in terms of elections, right? And as two women of color that are leading an economic and racial justice organization, that was really exciting.

But I think part of the challenge though, is how do we then get supported to be innovators, right? So, like you want to uplift our voices, you want to uplift our perspectives, but to what end, right? And I think part of what we've really been grappling with, or grappled with, in 2019 is how do we harness that support that folks were talking about and translate that

into what I think a lot of white men get the chance to be able to do, right, which is to be out there, take risks, be an innovator, right?

We talk about this a lot I think in the space of like technology, right, like folks get to try things, or men, get to try things and fail, and that's not considered a career blower for them, then they get to try something else, right? And they say they learned from that. But I think as women of color, I don't know if we're given the same leeway, right?

And I think you and I in particular, we're talking about a lot of innovative things, particularly when we're talking about structures of the economy, how we want to see the economy better meet the needs of people of color and women, talking about closing racial wealth and gender wealth inequities. Like we have to be supported to be innovative, to be able to try something and possibly fail, right? Or not and learn from that, but I find it challenging to be able to do that in this space, still.

ANNE PRICE: Yeah, I would agree with that. I think that I've often talked about who gets to be an innovator, whose ideas are most valued, and how do they become valued?

You know, it's interesting that when you're really trying to push out there and really try to push out some progressive ideas and take a risk, you're constantly asked, well who's already kind of confirmed that? You know, it's the credibility of, who's already said that that's also a good idea? And it's not until other people then weigh in and say hey, that's a great way to go, then that idea can take shape and take hold. And oftentimes, by that time, the idea has already been, kind of, extracted and other folks are running away with it.

So I do think that there is something about, even when we talk about, you know, gender justice and racial justice, at this time when we're—I'm hearing so much about equity in ways I don't think I've ever heard in my career, I still think to some extent, that part of that is really kind of faddish and paying lip service.

That might sound maybe a little bit jaded, but I do think that in some ways, we don't really know what that means. Because if we really understood what it means, we would be serving more the ideas that are coming from women, coming from women of color.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And yah, to play off of that, I think the idea of what does centering women and women of color's voices in particular, mean? I think we have yet to explore that, still, right? And really understand and define that because like, look what you

said, is it about propelling women of color who are purporting an idea you're already behind, or is it about supporting them in their own ideas, right? And really saying that we trust you, we believe that you know what's best for your community, and I think that's a space where we as field can grow more.

ANNE PRICE: Well, I really think about some of the pioneers, I mean we can go back so many generations, when people and particularly oppressed people—women, women of color—were really thinking about what their community needed and were really coming up with the kinds of ideas about and understanding of the structure of the economy in ways that we're talking about today, that they raised, sometimes 50-70 years ago.

And I think, I talk about this way of knowing—there's a way of knowing, there is a particular way of knowing—I think, that women and women of color can bring to the table that is just essentially seen as, really it's just devalued, right? It's not seen as legitimate. It's questioned, how do you know?

And I just think about women who came off of, really plantations, who came off of a sharecropping system and could articulate what this economy really is all about, because they lived it first hand. I mean we are still living in a sharecropping economy in a sense, right? And so, these ideas that seem, that we're still talking about today—for example, talking about the use of cash to support families—really did come from an understanding of how our economy actually is working and who it's working for. So, I really, I think that we still have a really long way to go in terms of really understanding what it truly means to support women and support women of color.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I think about how women are often the backbones of our families, right? Whether it be around caregiving, emotional caregiving, physical caregiving, but also how we take care of economic needs of our families in times of distress, right?

So I think about my grandmother, who was born and raised in India, who was not able to finish high school, right, did not have a high school education, but had to do a lot to care for my mother and her two brothers when their family fell on hard times, right? And there are so many stories of women from India who used their jewelry because that was really the only mechanism of economic security that they had, right? So wedding jewelry that they got, bracelets or necklaces that are passed down from generation to generation—this was how a mother would bestow economic security to her daughter, right? Is to give them a

piece of jewelry that would often have to get sold in times of economic precarity for families.

And these are the kinds of untold stories I think that we need to share even more, because even though we haven't been given necessarily the economic power throughout the years through policy, it's always happened in practice, right?

And I think that's how we have to think about things and when we're talking about policy, is that nobody lives—like men don't live in isolation from other people, and they live with women in families, right? So women's economic security is actually talking about everyone's economic security and I think that's the frame in which we need to enter in these conversations. And this is why we need to trust women and then like what you were saying, like women, there's a knowing. Because we are tasked with caring for families in a way that I'm not sure men are, right, socialized to do.

ANNE PRICE: Yeah, I would agree with that. I think that we've yet to really explore and understand the intricacies of a true lived economic experience by women.

We often talk about wages, we often talk about things like paid leave and policies similar to that, and they're important, there's no doubt about it but it's really not the complexity of our true economic lives and how they're entangled. How there's really kind of a multigenerational aspect to thinking about economic security that we sometimes miss—our data doesn't collect it—it's very nuanced, and we don't talk about how people bring traditions and cultural traditions to their families, right?

What you just talked about in terms of your family, it's often missed. And so, you know, we talk about—we need, you know, people need to save more, for example, we don't really understand how women go about saving. I think we're just, you know, in some ways, beginning to do that, but really we don't understand in terms of translating it to policy.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Right.

ANNE PRICE: So let's talk a little bit about the highs and a little bit about what we are excited about in 2020. Of course, this is going to be a very monumental year for our country, our nation. But in terms of work, what are you most excited about?

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Well, I mean one thing I'm really excited about—like I think I Tweeted this at the start of the year—I'm really ready to make 2020, I mean both a year and the decade of women.

Like I'm looking forward to signing more women, to having more all-female panels, uplifting the voices and perspectives of women, because I really think that that's what's sorely missing, particularly around conversations around the economy, and it not being seen as a side thing. Well this is a woman's issue, but again, like I was saying before, how women's economic needs are all of our society's economic needs, right? I'm really looking forward to changing the narrative and the script on that culturally, kind of as a cultural norm, and yeah, looking to help shape that narrative in a very different way.

ANNE PRICE: Yeah, I totally hear you, and I think that we can go deeper with the work.

I want to see, you know, as we talk about intersectionality, to really bring that to life in more ways. And so, I really think that there's something there around really looking at, not just the needs of women economically, but really lifting up their work in new ways.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yeah, and I think you know, part of that, we've alluded to this in a lot of the things—if you follow us on all the different ways in which you can follow us—we've alluded to this centering Blackness framework, right? That we're writing about, or writing right now, and releasing soon—but this idea of what putting out a vision of what would it look like to center Black women, right? In our policies, in both our economic policies or social policies, but if we really were about what is going to be helping Black women and how does that, in turn, help everyone, right, I think is really exciting and juicy to me.

So this idea of Black women best, which Janelle puts out from Groundwork Collaborative, I think is so exciting and I'm really juiced to be thinking about that as a concept for 2020.

ANNE PRICE: So talk a little bit about your passion, because I've seen you really, really be passionate about this project and this idea of centering Blackness and, as a non-Black person of color, why does this mean so much to you?

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: That's a really good question and you'd think I'd have a prepared answer, but I don't.

You know, it means so much to me because as I've been doing this work—I've been doing racial and gender justice work since I graduated from college, I would say actually even before that, right? Because the work starts at home, right? So I could say I've been doing this probably since I was 10 years old and I would like ask my dad, like, why aren't you vacuuming? Like why is it that me and Mom have to clean the house and you and my brother can just like hang out not doing anything, right? Like what's that about?

So from the wee ages of when I could talk to now, I've been thinking about racial and gender justice, right? And the more and more I've done the work, the more I see that anti-Blackness is the thread that holds all of us down, right?

So it obviously, in particular, impacts Black people in the U.S. context, and internationally actually, but I'm just talking about the U.S. context. And I just have seen how anti-Blackness plays out in multiple communities, right?

And so I can speak from a South Asian community, from being part of the South Asian community, there is definite anti-Blackness that happens and it shows up in colorism, right, it shows up in all these different terms that we use. But basically the darker you are, the less pretty you are—that's anti-Blackness, right? This idea of, as immigrants, when my parents immigrated to this country, what they wanted to be, what their gold star was, was whiteness, right? It was to be as white as possible and to blend in, not to be like Black folks, right?

That's anti-Blackness, right, and so I got those messages from a very, very young age, and so, I just think that what we need to do is really flip that on its head and raise up the glory of Blackness. And that will, in turn, help me, like my liberty and my justice for me is completely tied up with that of Black people, right? And when Black people are free, then I'm free. And unless Black people are free, I would not be free. Like there's something that would be holding me back, right? Just by virtue of being a person of color and a woman.

So, I'm passionate about it both from because I think it's the right thing to do, like from a moral standpoint, and because I truly believe in it. I truly believe that this is what this country—we need to really deal with anti-Blackness and, to me, the only way to do that is by centering Black people, and centering Black people's needs and acknowledging how anti-Blackness plays out in all of our—in everything, you name a thing, anti-Blackness is

there. And I really do believe that that is the hope, the vision, that will move us forward to true equality.

ANNE PRICE: Well, that's powerful. I'm really excited about this work as well and I think that for me, as a Black woman, being able to actually move into this work is really exciting because it's not anything I've been afforded the opportunity to do, in fact, quite the opposite, right?

I think that over my career—and I started my career really working in human services, working on issues of foster care and kinship care, at a time when Black and brown kids were flooding the foster care system—and working on issues like food security and other kinds of social services, there's absolutely no doubt how anti-Blackness played a role in how programs were designed, how we thought about serving people, why some people were treated better than others, and clearly the darker hue of the people needing the service, the worse it was and how it was devalued.

And so, I can see this from the perspective of the fact that I think anti-Blackness plays a major role in how we think about economic policies, how we definitely think about social policy, and it's never been an issue that can be really, not just only discussed, but really examined and really centered in terms of policy design and in terms of program design. It's always kind of pushed aside, right? It's raised maybe—maybe in a particular report or such—that anti-Black racism exists, but it's never been something that's been centered and examined in a way that would actually transform the way we deliver services and transform the kinds of policies that we advocate for.

And you know, there is this very, you know, almost visceral reaction by even saying the term, by even saying Blackness, that people react to that first makes them say, what about other people? Right, I mean immediately, almost like that's the first reaction that I have—that I've gotten many times on this, and the inability to just stop and actually take this in, right?

It's almost as if we can never focus on Black people specifically, but also that understanding that anti-Blackness does affect us all and it does hurt us all. It does hurt low income and struggling white people very, very much—particularly in our social safety net—very much. Who is going to be denied food stamps or TANF assistance, is really predicted on anti-Blackness.



So I do think it's a—to me, I think this is the next frontier beyond racial equity. I think racial equity has become muddled.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: It's the new multiculturalism.

ANNE PRICE: It's the new diversity and multiculturalism, it's just actually—but actually, I would love to see how anti-Blackness can be watered down, maybe it can. But I think that it in a way helps us deal with race and racism that actually doesn't divide us, but actually unifies us—

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Exactly.

ANNE PRICE: —actually helps us build, kind of, multiethnic and racial solidarity. Because we can see how we're connected through something that was constructed, through something that is threaded through systems and rules and policies and practice, so—

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And culture!

ANNE PRICE: —and culture, right?

Like, it's just interesting how we can appropriate, appropriate and hate at the same time, right? And so I really think this is an exciting frontier. I'm so excited to like, you know, explore this with you.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: But that's the thing is, like, using centering Blackness as a multiracial organizing tool like is—I know that sounds really wonky—but it means something to me and like it's really exciting you know because anti-Blackness is the thread through all different communities.

You see it in South Asian communities, you see it in East Asian communities, you see it in the Latinx community, you see it with white people, obviously, and you see it somewhat in Black communities, right? Because Black people are not a monolith, right?

ANNE PRICE: Right.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Black people are immigrants, Black people are gay, Black people are lesbians, Black people are trans, Black people are all the things, right? And there is obviously, like, different elements of anti-Blackness that plays out in all the different communities. So I think, to me, like if that is a common thread that we see, then how can we—why can we not organize around the opposite?

And giving—and I think folks are hungry for a vision. I think folks, a lot of folks, get that racism exists but we still don't know like what to do about it, right, and what is the thing? What is the thing we should be fighting for? Like to say, to be anti-racist, like how, right? So that's—I'm excited to add to the cannon of folks that are doing amazing work around this already, of giving folks that possibility, the how.

ANNE PRICE: Yeah, I agree. I think that when we think about identity, and we think about it in a monolith—which is very challenging—I mean I, you know, was asked like well what about, someone asked me, what about Latinx people? And I said, there are not Black Latinx people? Right?

And it's the way that we have somehow really simplified people's identity that we need to actually do more to really understand the complexity of identity and the complexity of anti-Blackness, actually, how it plays out in all these threads.

So, I mean it really raises—it's a whole other conversation, right? I think this takes us to another place that we typically don't have in conversations about race, in race right now—

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: That's right.



ANNE PRICE: —that could actually propel us forward and actually help us, you know, really create and build more kind of transformative types of approaches to our work.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Totally agree, so super looking forward to doing that.

ANNE PRICE: Great.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: You're entering into your fourth year—

ANNE PRICE: I think so.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —as the president, in May?

ANNE PRICE: Mm-hmm.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yeah, that's a big year! And I'm entering into my third year?

ANNE PRICE: I think third year.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yes. Second year as VP—third year at Insight, second year as VP. I mean I think it's going to be a really exciting year and decade. I mean I don't know if I'll be here for 10 years, but you know! [Laughter]

ANNE PRICE: That's a lot. [Laughter] I don't know if I will, so like—



JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: When the work is done, we will be done.

ANNE PRICE: When the work is done, that's right.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: When people have all centered Blackness in their lives, we will be done.

ANNE PRICE: We will be done.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Mm-hmm.

ANNE PRICE: And I think we're done with this episode right now.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yeah.

ANNE PRICE: So, thank you all for tuning in to this episode of Hidden Truths, the podcast of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development.

You can learn more about our work by visiting [Insight CCED dot org](http://InsightCCED.org). And be sure to follow us on Twitter; I'm @AnnePriceICCED, and Jhumpa is @Jhumpa_B. Thanks so much.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Thanks, everyone.