

[00:00:22.460] - Talat Yaqoob

Hi, my name is Talat Yaqoob and I am the founder of Pass the Mic, you've joined us on the Pass the Mic takeover of the On the Engender podcast. The reason for doing this is to amplify the voices of women of colour, their expertise and their experience across Scotland before we get started. And I introduce who we are hearing from today. I want to tell you a little bit about Pass the Mic. Pass the Mic was founded in October 2019. And it was founded largely in a fit of rage, which is how most of the projects in my life come about. It happened because I repeatedly I had been asked to participate in media, and when I was unable to do that, I would always pass on the name of a handy spreadsheet that I had on my laptop, names of women of colour who are experts in the field that they have asked about. So whether it was about racism, whether it was about women's economic empowerment, whether it was about women's political representation, and often none of the women that I have suggested were called, or asked to participate in my place.

[00:01:28.190] - Speaker 1

Secondly, I had an experience where I was asked to come along and talk about Diwali. Being Muslim and not celebrating Diwali, I was called largely because I am a woman of colour rather than knowing anything about me. Both of these things made me pretty angry and as a consequence, I set up Pass the Mic, which is a directory of women of colour. Experts and experts means lived experience as well as professional or learnt experience and expertise. On that list, we have almost 200 women from astrophysicists to economists, from teachers to public health experts, unpaid carers and campaigners, all levels of experience and expertise. And the purpose is for media to reach out and diversify the voices they hear from and the stories that get oxygen in Scottish Press. And it's also for people in any sector who are looking to do panels and events to be able to have a more diverse and more representative vision of Scotland on their panels and at their events. So that's what Pass the Mic is about. And you can find it online. Across four episodes, we'll be hearing from brilliant women who are part of the Pass the Mic funded project, and I've got the pleasure of introducing them at the moment. So today we've got Viana, we've got Helen and we've got and Ketsuda. Viana, could you like to introduce yourself and just say hi to everybody and tell them a little bit about yourself?

[00:02:59.810] - Viana Maya

Sure. Hi, everybody. My name is Viana Maya. I am the founder of Prospect and I joined Pass the Mic mainly just as everything that Talat said is really about being part of the conversation and not just being a one off and having the same people constantly being asked to talk for us or for the community. But there's a variety of people and yes, tell it with - there's 200 of us and possibly more to be added onto the list, so I'm looking forward to this conversation.

[00:03:28.460] - Talat Yaqoob

Hello, Helen.

[00:03:29.700] - Helen Minnis

Hi. Lovely to be here. Thanks for inviting me. I'm a professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and I do a lot of research into the mental health problems associated with abuse and neglect. And I was really interested to be involved with Pass the Mic because I was just aware of that I was relatively invisible compared to many of my white male colleagues in science. And it's just been a great opportunity.

[00:03:51.248]

And Ketsuda?

[00:03:51.410] - Ketsuda Phoutinane

And hello. Hi, everyone. My name's Ketsuda Phoutinane and I am a freelance journalist based in Glasgow. So I am an American immigrant to Scotland. And when I saw Talat and Pass the Mic, I thought it was such an incredible idea. And it really spoke to so many of the challenges and experiences and frustrations that I've gone through myself. And, you know, aside from that, it was a great opportunity to write something that was near and dear to my heart. And I think. I mean, I knew this, but having experienced the Pass the Mic group calls - because unfortunately we've never met in person - just the camaraderie and the understanding that you feel when you're in this group is just, you

know, it's just too good for words.

[00:04:52.350] - Talat Yaqoob

I have to say, you know, when we had our first couple of meetings, one of my favourite things was seeing, although, like you said, because it is only been online, but seeing all the little boxes on Zoom filled with women of colour. There was just something about that that gave me so much joy, because it just doesn't happen very often in Scotland and everybody sharing those experiences. And one of the things that's really critical about those kinds of safe spaces is not having to explain the racism or not having to explain why something was racist. But people on the call understand because they have had that experience themselves. So that kind of camaraderie and sisterhood has been really such a critical part of Pass the Mic. And I'm just so grateful to have been able to have the sisterhood around and being able to get to know so many brilliant women of colour through this project. So, yeah, you're going to get to hear from some of them - not all of them, there's so many - but some of them over these episodes as well. So thanks so, so much. I wanted to ask you, what do you hope is gained from participating in Pass the Mic? And what has your experience of working with media either through Pass the Mic or in other ways? What has your experience of media in Scotland been so far? Helen, why don't I come to you first?

[00:06:17.940] - Helen Minnis

So. Oh, it's I would agree with you 100 percent about, Talat, about the experience of meeting all these incredible women of colour. And I you know, I've made friends through this process who I think will be friends for life and friends from very, very different backgrounds, which, of course, increases your creativity and for me, what I've really gained from Pass the Mic, apart from that, is just the more-than-usually supportive input from media colleagues about writing and TV presenting. And because we've been lucky enough to have this group focus on it

[00:06:55.710] - Viana Maya

I'm going to jump in. So my experience has been a mixture. Before Pass the Mic, I've always avoided it because I've always felt I was called as part of a tokenism rather than actually being heard and then once I started start Pass the Mic. And again that - just the faces and the solidarity and feeling like there were other people that I can ask questions of, I can, you know, have the support. And it was OK to say 'no' to certain things because sometimes you do feel like, you know what, I want to input my voice, but then you're not the right person that they should be asking. Whereas now we've got a directory that we can send people to and say, 'well, don't ask me, but there is somebody else here that could provide the accurate and proper information', because I felt like sometimes with some the larger organisation it's very much of 'we just need a voice, a face, go for it'. And again, I think it was a shock of how it's edited as well. That kind of threw me back. But being part of Pass the Mic meant the having the training and having the support, just being able to really take my time, throw my voice in there has really helped a lot.

[00:08:05.310] - Ketsuda Phoutinane

My experience of Scottish media has been quite mixed, I think is the kindest way to put it. So to explain, I'm a freelance journalist and I have been freelance more than I have been staffed for the last seven or so years that I have worked in British media and mainly Scottish media. And, you know, the things that you hear about what the issues facing journalism today, the lack of funding, the cutbacks, how insanely difficult it is to run a newspaper or to get on staff. Well, if you are a person of colour or worse, a woman of colour, it's you know, it's tenfold, I think when you have this nexus of sexism, classism, racism, and you're kind of a victim to all of those things, it has definitely showed up in my experience. And I I would, you know, place a fair bet that anyone who is a person of colour in media would say the same.

[00:09:23.540] - Talat Yaqoob

And, of course, you know, we've heard a lot about that when...Recently it's come about because of the way in which Meghan Markle has been treated in British media. And there's been lots of talk about institutionalised racism in British media. But what what was concerning was how quickly - I think it was the Society of Editors - came to the defence of media rather than a little bit of self reflection. And it took, you know, a letter written by a number of prominent people of colour, and journalists of colour

to express to the Society of Editors that that wasn't acceptable and that institutionalised racism was real. And to still be at the point where we are having to evidence it and have people take it seriously and acknowledge that the racism is there, let alone actually doing something about it, is, to be perfectly honest, depressing. We should be so much further on from that. And one of the things that, you know, in our, in our sessions in Pass the Mic sessions we've talked a lot about is the way in which the issue of racism is dealt with by media - racism and sexism is dealt with as a topic and the false equivalence. So, you know, if we're going to have somebody on to talk about racism, we've got to have somebody else on that doesn't believe racism is an issue. And that kind of false equivalence and the narrative around race and racism is so toxic that I think it puts a lot of people of colour off participating. And being the expert voice in media, what do you think is something that you've encountered as well?

[00:11:06.290] - Ketsuda Phoutinane

Oh, definitely. You know that the Society of Editors issue is just. I honestly was surprised by that, I mean, I shouldn't have been because to just outright say it, you know, with your whole heart and have them like, you know, the just the most of the top British establishment and media say that, you know, racism, sexism isn't an issue. Around the same time, the whole Meghan Markle interview came out just, you know, you couldn't make this stuff up and, you know, the kind of bringing this back to Pass the Mic, I, you know, one of the reasons I was excited by this was to 1) the whole the issue was acknowledged and 2), there were many Scottish media publications who had signed up to this and who acknowledged the issue. And not only that, wanted to reach a hand out and hear us and publish our voices and not have that necessarily be about race at all. You know, at the worst end of it, the most cynical side of it is that in participating in Pass the Mic, this was a box ticking exercise. You know, it's; the Pass the Mic articles were kind of served up to them on a platter, more or less - so many of these hugely accomplished smart women with, with so many things to say. So the content was done. It wasn't paid for by the partners themselves. And all they had to do was click submit on pretty great copy. If one of these publications were to come under fire for racism, they could just kind of like point, or like, tap these articles, be like, 'look over here, we're all right.' So. I think that's the worst end of it, but there have been media partners who have gone more above and beyond others in, in hosting talks and training sessions and one on one talks with us, and that's been great. What will be interesting to see how seriously the media partners took the mission that Pass the Mic is; how they'll work with us and other women of colour and people of colour moving forward, whether they'll keep commissioning us or better yet, if they're very serious and which is very rare in this industry, especially in Scotland, is to hire people of colour. And that would be, I think, the more meaningful outcome for these newspapers.

[00:14:06.420] - Helen Minnis

I couldn't agree with you more, Ketsuda, and I think, one of the interesting experiences that I had through this process that really made me think was getting two very expert female colleagues involved in the programme. And it was one of our media partners who had been extremely supportive, really had put a lot of work in. But that experience made me realise that there's so many subtle but devastating unconscious biases right across the media. So they were interviewed about their area of expertise, which was only peripherally to do with the fact that they are women of colour. And then in the edit, there was basically a white man talking at length about their area of expertise and they literally ended up with just a couple of seconds. And you just I just couldn't help feeling that had happened despite those, in that media organisation's, best efforts because at the end of the day, I think what often happens is that women of colour are really thought to be only there to talk about being women of colour. And that seems to kind of trump all of their other expertise. So I think it is just going to have to be a constant. So we're just going to have to keep pitching up and reminding everyone about this in any way we can. And I'm sure hiring more people of colour to media organisations can only help.

[00:15:46.390] - Talat Yaqoob

Yeah, I think I think that's bang on Helen. I think I, I'm going to be keeping a very close eye on the media partners after the funding period is done to say, well, now that the funding period isn't there, what, what are you doing? How are you elevating the voices of women of colour? How are you making sure that you are genuinely representative of Scotland? Because we know that it doesn't even meet

the population numbers, let alone knowing that, you know, poverty and inequality impact women of colour more. But we forget even having them as experts is not even a representative sample of the, of the population. And I think, Helen, what you talked about there, you can have one or two people really dedicated to a cause, really dedicated to the Pass the Mic project, but it's the whole organisation and whole media culture that makes so many decisions before we read or see or hear something on media. And it's all the people that are involved in that decision that need to be fully on board with this, because all of the little micro decisions that get made before we see the cut up, edited part of whatever it is we were part of, that will tell us how seriously they take women of colour and inclusion and anti-racism or anti-sexism as an organisation. Having just a handful of people who care about the Pass the Mic project or care about inclusion and anti-racism isn't going to cut it because it's not going to make a difference to the the big culture problem within media.

[00:17:22.450] - Viana Maya

Absolutely. And I think just even as we're talking there, I'm noticing in Scotland there's a lot of focus on representation of the visual but not really looking at the the whys. So people jump on board and say yes to getting involved and being a part of this. But I also feel a little bit like those may be underestimating the actual talent that was going to be presented, those going to be available. And the articles, it was just fantastic to see the range of voices and refreshing to hear different opinions and again, voices available. You know, as Ketsuta said, it was there on a platter, but is a missed opportunity if you're not going to go back and reflect and see, actually, this is an opportunity to shift and to actually have action that is, that is visible, that is tangible, rather than just a representation of people that you can call that will sit there for two seconds, maybe say something, and then you move on and say, yeah, we've got a bit diversity on a screen or we've got diversity on a piece of paper. But it's really that, and I suppose it comes down to all the diversity and inclusion work that people do in organisations, which again, is very much a tick box exercise but without realising that we need accountable action. And I think what I see, what I hope for Pass the Mic, is that a lot of the media organisations who have joined in, especially those that haven't actually done anything that moves them forward, is that if they'll really reflect and go back and realise that we can't go back to what it used to be, we've now seen what it's like to have real representation to really to read all the different voices. We know that there's a variety of you know - we say we've got two hundred - but there's a lot more talent and experts out there and looking at our expertise rather than the colour of our skin. But, yeah, it's really that I keep thinking about it. I just thinking representation and just have people on. And, you know, there seems to be where we're stuck at when it comes to a media and shifting.

[00:19:29.950] - Talat Yaqoob

Yes. Back to that. Are you doing this because it looks good and it ticks a box? Or are you doing it because you believe in culture change? And that takes a lot more than being part of our project. Right. It takes reviewing what the inside of your organisation looks like, how it behaves, what is commissioned, how it's commissioned, how you support people. There's a lot of work to be done. But on the on the work to be done, you know, say, the media partners were quietly listening to this. What would you recommend? What do you think that they should be doing? And what do you think are the things that would make a difference for the experiences of women in colour and the, kind of competency and quality of media in Scotland too. What would be your suggestions to them?

[00:20:18.920] - Helen Minnis

Can I jump in there? I mean, I think the task is actually the same task for the for all aspects of society. We need to be all recognising how brainwashed we are by our history. You know, we, our human society has lived through several centuries of colonialism, and that makes us underestimate people of colour and overestimate white people. So, I mean, oddly enough, I had a really interesting chat with a taxi driver today where he said, what do you think about taking the knee? And initially, you know basically when he heard that I thought it was a good idea. He begged to differ. And we then had a really fruitful conversation about the fact that at the end of the day, my experience is different from his and that there were things he won't see because he's a white man and he listened to that. But that's a constant, daily conversation that needs to be had or we're just not going to move forward.

[00:21:15.410] - Ketsuda Phoutinane

Helen, that the thing you said about it being a subtle but devastating thing, I think that sums it up so

well for what I have experienced and what I've known in Scottish media, I think, it's these conversations about ugh, diversity, representation, it's such a double edged sword because, yes, these conversations need to happen. But I feel personally that what what degree is this? Is this us as people of colour begging for our humanities to be seen? You know? I don't want to have that conversation anymore. It's demeaning. It's tiring. I'm bored of it. But also, could we just, kind of, can we just get that point already so things can actually happen for change, real change to come to fruition?

[00:22:09.870] - Viana Maya

I totally, totally agree with you. And it is that frustration. I just recently ran a anti-racism workshop. And the question within this as a board of trustee, and the question there was really where where are they? You know, last year everybody was 'pausing to learn', but it's almost like people are still on pause and the feeling that they have to accelerate and do it. But there's not that tangible. We want action because we have been having this conversation and we're going to have to continue the conversation. But to continue the conversation, we want to also see that you're shifting forward. You're coming towards us. You're listening, and acting. You're learning, and acting. And I think that's that's where the frustration is coming from, is like this is a perfect platform to actually engage. So what I would want from the media companies is to reflect, properly, evaluate, come and ask this question, get some real feedback and own the feedback, not not get offended or annoyed or upset because, oh, my gosh, we did a great gesture having you on board. But actually, listen - so how do we progress? How do you actually start to hire us? How do you pay us? Call us? Connect with us? You have our details, so it's not like you don't know where we are - because that's usually the thing, isn't it? 'We don't know where people are, we don't know how to reach them'. Now you know how to reach us and start to do - it's doing that kind of work in tandem. We can't keep having the conversation where we all sit back and wait until you shift. So we need that. We need a shift. So I totally get your frustration there because you feel it. And sometimes you have to park the emotion to to engage with people. But then it's just like 'I've just gave you an hour out of my time. I don't think you're going to shift' and you're then left to go, 'oh my gosh, do I continue to have these conversations?' So, yeah, I'm at the same spot [laughs]

[00:23:59.640] - Helen Minnis

Well. Couldn't agree with you more, Viana And honestly, I think for me, it's such an interesting meld because I honestly think I'm a more interesting child and adolescent psychiatrist to talk to because I'm a woman of colour. And I hope that this, I hope that the Pass the Mic process I think it was you that said earlier on, I hope all these fantastic articles, these fantastic spots that people had on telly or TV, and other media. I really hope it will help our media colleagues to realise that wait a minute, we are really, really interesting bunch of people. And if you do engage us, you're going to have a much more interesting media.

[00:24:47.510] - Talat Yaqoob

100 %. Helen, one of things that you said there about the conversation that needs to happen. The problem, of course, is that our media doesn't really provide platforms for nuanced conversations. We are consuming headlines and short tweets about false equivalence and often click bait because it's also about the number of clicks you get because it's a commercial business, too. And as a consequence, a lot of the nuanced conversations, whether it is about racism, sexism, is not able to happen and as a consequence, directly, in some cases directly, because that is the purpose and some and very many indirectly, create and sows more division both across society and within media. What do you think can be done about that environment? Do you think it's something that needs to to end? Do you think it's something that media has to take more responsibility for?

[00:25:43.280] - Viana Maya

Absolutely. I absolutely. Click bait for me is like marketing in general and it kind of links with society, organisations, again, coming back to diversity and inclusion work. It's all trends. You know, when we're talking to employers like last year, our voice is - the trend was to amplify our voices. This year, it's almost like we've gone into mute and, you know, people using anything to do with equality or diversity or humanity turns into underneath the bold 'woke', we're trying to be woke. This is woke. And I don't think people actually understand what that means to them anymore. It's just a way to stop the conversation. So media needs to have that responsibility of 'if you're creating content that requires

people to have conversation where people are going to learn, be aware of not...just stop using click bait. If one starts, maybe the others will follow, but it's having that. Whereas I find with media, we don't know what tabloid is, what's real news anymore, because everybody needs to hit rates, they need the numbers, they need the figures. And because everything needs to be - we need to be constantly on, again, because of social media - there seems to be a blurred line between real information, real world and reality. And I think, again, click bait marketing all kind of comes under one banner and that's a responsibility they need to take. Otherwise, we can't have these conversations. Otherwise we'll have to wait for another something to happen in terms of equality, and then that's when they bring us on board to have to join in or to have conversations.

[00:27:17.630] - Ketsuda Phoutinane

Viana, that's such a good point, because, thinking about this the first things that comes to mind as a journalist and thinking about the media landscape right now is clicks. Is money. Is that the central tenet of digital journalism, the easiest one perhaps, is click bait and looking back like 10 years ago, what did click bait mean? Is meant a benign BuzzFeed article or quiz and now click bait means something so different, so toxic, dangerous. And especially if you are on the receiving end as a person or a woman of colour, it is literally dangerous. You know, looking at an editor's point of view that one measurable, definable thing is clicks. And if you start hyping up the outrage machine with a very toxic op-ed by a right wing person or on the other side, something that on the left, something maybe, perhaps is like some inflated small issue on Twitter that day. But because you're a digital journalist and you have to write a certain number of articles a day or get a number of hits so you don't get fired, you start writing about that because that's pretty much guaranteed to get you something more than what's actually going on that is not that great of news or TV or whatever. You know, it's - that's obviously a terrible thing. But as for moving ahead for. Making way for proper news rather than really toxic, awful points of contention to just divide people, I'm not sure anymore these days what can be done to make it better.

[00:29:24.640] - Helen Minnis

It's so interesting hearing you talk, because I can't help comparing the Scottish media to the English media. And I do think we are ahead in some ways. So the whole kind of click bait culture, I just have the sense that perhaps that has grown out of an incredibly argumentative media culture that comes from that kind of white public school debating society type of culture. You know, and if you switch on some of the big U.K. radio stations in the morning, it's quite obnoxious, the degree to which people are just arguing for the sake of argument. And so I think my whole click culture does grew out of that. So in some ways, I feel a sense of optimism in Scotland because I actually think parliament has been set up to be more discursive. And I think my experieces - I was once invited to do an interview on London radio and Scottish radio on the same day, and the research process was really different. Literally, the English one was was saying, 'we're going to get someone to give an opposing view', and the Scottish one was saying, 'we want to really understand, delve into what you're saying'. So for me, for me actually, the whole the whole kind of history of colonialism feeds into this, and we need to really push back against that debating society culture. And say no.

[00:30:57.350] - Viana Maya

Absolutely. I think, again, because of - and I get both both experience of Scotland and in England -but I think, again, because the larger, the media organisations that we have that tend to have the same type of people recruited. So although we have some really good smaller media outlets in Scotland that we can be aware of. We know that the news, the larger majority of news that people seem to consume, it's coming from, influenced from, the English media. So it's really having that awareness now that we start talking about making sure that we avoid becoming that while we had some great conversation, especially during the election, it is very different here in Scotland to actually see people having proper grown up debates, to see programmes that were talking about how we want to diversify Scotland parliament, considering we've not had it for 22 years, but we're getting, we're getting there. But again, it's having that pushback, as you said, Helen. Really, we have to continue to to plough in there. I don't know if we need to have our own media segment, to have our own podcast, to have our own radio station, TV station, something that keeps us in these conversations where we're not waiting to be invited. It might just be that - that we start to create these platforms so that we can continue to be that voice that is pushing back against what is still not shifting for us.

[00:32:24.280] - Talat Yaqoob

Or maybe that's what comes next, right? Pass the Mic radio channel, Pass the Mic TV? [laughs]

[00:32:31.600] - Viana Maya

I'm there. I am there. I will give you my pennies, Talat, we absolutely need it.

[00:32:38.980] - Talat Yaqoob

Right, so I've got my presenters and my editors already, that's fine. We've run out of time and there's so much to be able to talk about and we need to talk about within this. But such critical points about what media needs to do, what the experiences have been, and the the historical context of racism, sexism, how those two things intersect and where they find themselves in media. And I think the biggest takeaway from this is Pass the Mic the project, Pass the Mic directory is not a tick box exercise. You participate in it because, you know, media needs to change. You participate in it and you engage with the women there because you value their expertise as equals to other people who you are engaging in media as well. And that's, that's the purpose. I want to see a huge, huge thank you to Viana, Helen and Ketsuda, as always it's phenomenal being able to talk to you And it just illustrates how expert, how phenomenal the women on the Pass the Mic list are. And we will have three more episodes to come of the Pass the Mic takeover of the On the Engender podcast. So please do listen for that. And if you are women of colour, no matter what your expertise are, your lived experience, your professional expertise and educational expertise that you want to share with media or on panels, please make sure you do sign up to the Pass the Mic list and help change the face of Scottish media and help us change the culture within Scottish media, too. So thank you for listening and I hope I get to talk to you again in the next episode.