

Beauty + Justice Podcast  
EP7: + The Role of Businesses with Boma Brown-West

LISSAH JOHNSON

You're listening to the Beauty + Justice Podcast where we talk with folks from a variety of fields about what it will take to create a more clean and equitable future beauty for everyone. These conversations are led by Dr. Tamarra James-Todd, a trailblazer at Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health and head of the Environmental Reproductive Justice Lab, and I'm your host, Lissah Johnson, a PhD candidate at Harvard Chan.

Hey listeners, thanks for tuning in to our 7th episode, I'm glad you're here. So, for the past few episodes, we've really been focusing in on the role of clinicians and the healthcare system in reaching beauty justice. But now let's talk business, specifically the beauty business. The important players within the beauty industry supply chain include the manufacturers that are making the beauty products and the distributors and retailers that get the products to the customers. As we've talked about in previous episodes, the market is flooded with products that contain chemicals of concern. So, what would it look like to get the beauty industry itself on board with the beauty justice movement?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

A critical thing that they can do is setting up strong chemicals policy or commitment to sell safer products.

LISSAH JOHNSON

That was Boma Brown-West currently the Chief Growth Officer at Healthy Building Network and formerly the Director of Consumer Health at EDF + Business, which is the Environmental Defense Fund arm that partners with businesses to bring more sustainable environmental focused leadership and operations to corporations and supply chains. In this episode, she and Dr. Tamarra James-Todd will talk about how EDF is helping businesses commit to making smarter, safer choices when it comes to the chemical formulations of the personal care products that they manufacture, distribute, and sell to customers. They also talk about the growth of online retailers or e-commerce and the opportunities this provides for more equitable access to safer products. This is a fascinating conversation that begins our two-episode dive into the role of business in beauty justice. Now I'll pass it off to Dr. Tamarra James-Todd.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I am delighted today to have a friend and colleague, Boma Brown-West join us today from the Environmental Defense Fund. I'm excited about today's talk because we are going to get a chance to talk about a topic that doesn't so much come up in the idea or the space of thinking about beauty justice and so, Boma, would you mind introducing yourself?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Sure, yes, I'm Boma Brown-West, I am Director of Consumer Health at Environmental Defense Fund or EDF, and I work on the EDF + Business team which is a corporate engagement arm of EDF. And we're all about leveraging the power of the marketplace to drive environmental results and by partnering with high impact companies to transform them.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

That is awesome. That is awesome. And so, you already hinted at kind of what the topic of today's podcast is going to be about, which is really thinking about the role of the marketplace and beauty justice, environmental exposures, and health and I'm wondering then how exactly did you get into this work? Tell us a bit about your story. How did you come to doing work in the marketplace of beauty justice?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Sure, yes it wasn't a direct straight line, that's for sure. So, first and foremost, I always like to do this for my mom, just mentioned that I am a proud daughter of two strong and persevering Nigerian immigrants. One was in one was an engineer, my mom is a health scientist and so, you know, now I look at my career and I see that it is kind of a meeting of those two things because professionally I started out as an engineer, so over time I started steering my career towards sustainable products and systems and environmental policy. And so, and as I was doing that over the years, I realized that not a lot of people were really talking about something that is, so that's such a big part of sustainability. And it's also very personal to everyone, and that's our exposure to toxic chemical pollution and its negative impacts on our health. And that's really what brought me to EDF so that I could focus on that more.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I'm curious, you know a lot of time we, we hear about exposures, particularly in the beauty space of like, well, it's the individual level. It's all about the individual, and we don't hear a whole lot about you know those upstream factors, and it seems to me that you're, you know, you're in the business of really thinking about what are the policies what are the other systems that are at play? So, I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about how, you know, what are some of those upstream factors that have that you think may influence sustainability.

LISSAH JOHNSON

We've mentioned upstream factors in previous episodes, and I just wanted to give a bit more context on this common public health and health disparities lingo. If we think of health, like a stream at the farthest downstream end, we have health outcomes which can be positive or negative like good health and longevity or mortality and disease. And as you move upstream there are different elements that impact these health outcomes from individual risk factors and behaviors and then moving more upstream, there are different environmental conditions, including the social and built environment, and finally, institutional and societal factors. The more upstream you go, the further away you get from individual interventions, and there are more opportunities for macro level systemic solutions.

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Sure, you know if we think about the products that we use every day, you know, make up products, cleaning products, clothing that we wear. All of those things you know before they actually before we purchase them before we bring them into our home there are so many decisions that have been made before us, have been made for us by companies as to what these products are going to contain and how they're going to work. And you know so first and foremost, the ingredients that go into those products, the primary, the thing that's top of mind for companies is I want my product to function in this way. So,

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for example, I want this to be long lasting or I want this lotion to really be able to get into the skin and make it feel soft and everything, so they're primarily thinking about function and what comes along with that is sometimes oftentimes not a consideration for okay, but these the ingredients that make up this product, what could be, what are some of those impacts to human health? Some of those long-term impacts that can exist. So that's really what we're trying to get people to think about more is really evaluating not just how does this, how does this ingredient work on a functional scale, and what might it cost? Because you know they have to, they're thinking about the cost of their products and how that translates into the sales price but also what are those underlying hazards of those ingredients and how are they going to be exposed to the product ingredient on, you know, over time through the use of the of the product, and so that's really where we try to point people towards, thinking and embedding into their product development product design process.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

That's I think that that's such an important point being able to start helping companies to refocus and reframe kind of what you know, so now you know what the function is, but really being able to consider what are you putting into your products and how might that impact health you know? So, a furniture company may not be necessarily be thinking about you know the chemicals they're putting in impacting someone's health, but you know creating a pathway in which they can actually take those factors in and that that's really, I think that's such a unique perspective and yet so important, and so would you say that this 5 pillars for a safer chemical leadership is one of the strategies or tools that EDF is using to really help companies refocus or have a new lens towards thinking about the impact of what they do and how it impacts health?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Yeah, that was exactly where I was gonna head the next. Yeah, we created the five pillars of safer chemical leadership as a framework to guide companies on their journey towards safer products and its main focus is to really look at what does it mean to do this on the ground? How can companies really execute this safer chemicals, safer product philosophy and the reason that we created the pillars is that early on we noticed that you know companies were stuck. They wanted, they wanted to meet this desire that you know consumers have, right, consumers want safe products and their homes, and they didn't and they didn't know what do we do with our current business practices to make this happen. What ingredients should we be removing? What alternatives should we go into, so the pillars are those essential areas for companies to focus on.

And just really quickly, you know, their institutional commitment is the first one. Supply chain transparency is our pillar about the visibility that companies need into what's being used by their suppliers. With safer product design, this is about adopting the right business processes to ensure that you're actually eliminating toxic chemicals and vetting the safety of new ones as you're, as you're bringing them in and that you're actually measuring your progress along the way. And then the last two are informing consumers and public commitment and those two pillars they really speak to how honest a company is being about their products, about their methods and about their progress.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

So, what I'm really hearing, I think, that you hit the nail on the head with the point that I kind of hear throughout is the idea, concepts of effective communication and transparency. And so how do you go about making sure that it's not just companies, but also retailers themselves? What is their role in all of this?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Yeah, you know, that's retailers, the retail space is where I spent most of my work, because retailers, by being that bridge between the consumer and brand manufacturers, they have an important role to play in really setting that demand and setting it for the business, setting it for brand manufacturers and for suppliers, upstream suppliers and so one critical thing that they can do is setting up strong chemicals policy or commitment to sell safer products and to really live those the five pillars I mentioned really kind of set that as a goal for themselves. But then for their upstream suppliers, another key thing that retailers can do is to identify the chemicals that they want removed from products. And that's a way that also helps show that they recognize that there are, you know, there are these toxic chemicals out there that are known to be toxic for these reasons, we no longer want these in in products, and you're seeing that now in the clean, the emergence of like the clean beauty space, right? There's a key role that retailers can play so that you're not just seeing one brand changing or one brand transforming, but you can see the entire beauty portfolio transform.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

And so, I guess that that really brings up another point, you know, we're talking about beauty justice, and so we kind of laid the groundwork of, like you know, we're talking about this in the concept of a marketplace, and so these upstream factors that you know can sometimes get lost in translation when thinking about, you know, beauty, people often go right to the individual level and individual behaviors, but there's so much that feeds into that, what's available or accessible to people. What's you know, what, they may actually be using, because what what's being marketed to them. And so, what I'd like to kind of spend a little bit of time talking about is the justice piece of this. You know, in the marketplace space of thinking about beauty, would you say the clean beauty experience is being equitably experienced across the board? And if not, what are some of the kind of the marketplace or systems that are in place that make it inequitable for some.

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Yeah, no, that's an, that's a great question, and it's certainly where I've been prioritizing a lot of my work now, because, you know, first, there's the overall safer beauty quest, right? That we're trying to change the entire sector and I have achieved a lot of success there in terms of getting retailers and some brands to set public commitments on this. And we've also seen this growth of clean beauty, but when it comes to beauty justice, there is a huge gap because today the beauty sector has not prioritized making products for people of color safer even though even though those products, those products that are marketed to people of color and primarily women of color contain more toxic ingredients and the data there the data also bears out that there's a noticeable difference in terms of the levels of these toxic substances in the bodies of women of color like you and me, right? And so, even though clean, the clean beauty revolution is taking over the marketplace. Clean beauty products are still predominantly being

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geared towards White women, and so there is there's a big gap here that needs to be addressed and what I'm trying to do through my work at EDF is make sure that as we're getting, you know, safer products to market, that racial equity is being put front and center in this and that where the need is greatest in products created for and marketed to women of color we are seeing faster improvement.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

You know, that's terrific to hear. I know that about you know roughly 8 to 10 years ago a colleague and I really sat down to try to grapple with this issue of, we were interested in doing an intervention and we wanted to reduce exposure to personal care product chemical known as phthalates, and so I know you and I both know about phthalates, but these are, for those of you all who may not know, these are endocrine disrupting chemicals that are known to affect, you know, the reproductive system, the cardiovascular system, and so on, and we wanted to do this work where we would do development intervention around personal care products, and it was specifically looking at women of color. Because we knew that they had much higher concentrations from our national data set and Boma, what I was really disheartened by was when we worked with our business strategy department to identify business partners that would be willing to develop, you know, basically, the intervention product they all said, well, this isn't sustainable because women of color will not purchase safer or green products. And I, you know, these were major manufacturers that I won't name, but, you know, this idea or concept that women of color are, you know, are not interested or cannot afford or whatever misconceptions are out there around the ability to purchase or be interested in purchasing safer products. Have you run across this?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Yeah, I am also disheartened by that myth because I, you know, everyone wants to have safe products. Everyone does right? And especially today. As we see, uh, more, you know, more companies trying to chase the millennial consumer, the Gen. Z consumer, guess who cares about chemical safety more? Guess who cares about sustainable companies and products more? It's those same consumers and it is, it is women of color who care about these issues and who want to bring safer products into their homes. There is that market base there, you know, I think the myth that you bring up is very similar to that old, very similar to that overall thought of oh if I try and create that product that uses safer ingredients, no one's gonna buy it. No one's gonna buy green products. It's something that you know, it's been, it's been shown to be proven wrong because, guess what? Even when we were having our economic slowdown a few years ago and, you know, same you know also over the last two years when we've had the pandemic and everything the marketplace for, and you can call them green products, sustainable products, clean products it has steadily been growing. That consumer demand is there, and it's borne out in in people's purchase habits, yeah, and so, I'll leave it there but there that the demand the demand is absolutely there, the desire is there.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I think that this raises an important point about accessibility and availability, because if you can do what, you're you know recommending across the board, it doesn't matter. Then you know where you're shopping, what store happens to be closest to you or if you shop online. The actual products are safer and so across the board, so I really appreciate that because I often I'm sure you do too get this question about, well, you know people particularly like you, know, the millennials and younger generations are

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starting to buy everything online, so its, things are more accessible. Safer products are more accessible, but I think brand and brand awareness and knowledge of what is safer is also that becomes maybe even a greater issue because it's hard to know, you know, the go to product if you haven't kind of changed that what you're making available and how you get that information to people going back kind of transparency and communication, right?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Exactly transparency, yeah, and I'm glad you brought up e-commerce because yes, e-commerce, particularly in the last few years, has really started to dominate in terms of where people are buying their products and on one hand it does offer the opportunity to be more transparent. To share more information about the safety of your product, about the methods you use to, to make sure that your products contain safer ingredients and that is certainly something that we've been pushing, you know, released an e-commerce playbook last year for retailers on that very end, pushing that and our clean beauty road map this year really pushes companies on what are the key elements to demonstrating to consumers information that helps them be more informed as they're making purchases.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

To be honest, I hadn't thought about the point of, you know, just the additional information that you can gather from kind of the e-commerce space compared to when you just kind of walk into a store and you know you're just looking at a label, for example. That's that I had, you know, that is a really critically important point, and the and the importance of that in the clean beauty space. So, I'm gonna pivot us a little bit because I'm wondering, you know, can you tell us a bit more about Environmental Defense Fund and kind of the current priorities around beauty justice.

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Sure, yes, and so just kind of going back the main goal for us is to transform companies, their operations and their supply chain. So, we're getting that whole kind of market transformation. And so, when it comes to beauty justice, there are three main things that we are encouraging or influencing companies to do. And the first one is committing to removing toxic ingredients from personal care products marketed to women of color. Because that's the very first step, right? Making sure that they're that reformulated products or new products are using only verified safer ingredients and honestly and you know just what that means, in essence is we don't want new products to be introducing ingredients that have the same or worse hazards, right? Because then we're back to where we started and then finally what you and I were talking about a little while ago is making it easier for shoppers to be able to find safer products by using trusted labels, certifications, or providing more information on the product packaging or online about the ingredients. So those are our three the three main things that we are trying to push companies to focus their attention on to make to make great strides on.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

That's I think that that's such a critical point and I'm curious just for like the entrepreneur that's listening to this today. Who's really interested in transforming their product. There's so many people these days entering into this, you know cleaner beauty space. And thinking about these issues, but really, not knowing how to get started, like where do they go from, you know, from here basically. How do they, how do they start really thinking about this, what's step one for them?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

Ooh yeah, good question. I think step one is to I would say it's to understand where they are today when it comes to when it comes to chemicals to their ingredients and being able to discern like what are toxic chemicals? What is that toxic chemical universe? Right? Because we're not saying that all chemicals are bad, would never say that cause the whole world, I mean the whole world is made of chemicals, right? But there is there's a need as an entrepreneur really starting out to get a sense of when you're choosing ingredients it's not just about their function. As I mentioned earlier, it's not just about what can this ingredient do in my product, we have to think about the larger context.

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Yeah, I know that I think you're spot on and I think that those are really helpful, I think, steps to for someone to take if they're interested in kind of, the way forward how to navigate this space. And so, I'm just going to end with this final question because we talked a lot about systems we talked about, you know, businesses that are producing these products. And retailers who are selling these products and, you know, people who are trying to just start out and so in the context of systems and thinking about all of the different components that make up this complex issue now. What do you see is kind of the way forward for working together whether that's researchers, policymakers, companies, you know, being able to work together to develop a sustainable solution around beauty justice?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

It's key for companies to really look inside and see what are, if we're trying to get to the future, what are those changes to our business model to our way of thinking when it comes to product development that we have to change and that can't be done alone, you know there are key things that businesses within themselves have to do, but that also requires partnership and collaboration with their suppliers, with researchers who are looking at the newer chemistries or who are better defining what some of the current problems are. And sometimes it also means the industry coming together, working in a pre-competitive space to try and grapple with issues you know, for example, one thing we really tried to help catalyze a few years ago was pre-competitive work on surfacing safer preservatives because that is an issue across the industry, right?

DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

No, and I and I do think you know you raised the important point of partnership and collaboration is essential, so you know, I've really enjoyed this discussion. It's been terrific. Is there anything else you wanted to share?

BOMA BROWN-WEST

I just wanted to say that you know, I'm glad that you're helping to build awareness and raise awareness around beauty justice and the need for beauty justice because as much as we see this inequity that exists, we also want to help other shoppers like ourselves right, be able to recognize this and really harness their voice to continue to push companies to provide safer, safer solutions for everyone, and in particular for people of color. So yeah, thank you I had a really great time today too.

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DR. TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Great, OK, thank you again. It was wonderful to speak with you today.

LISSAH JOHNSON

Beauty is an environmental justice issue, but we as a community do have power and agency to push for more just chemical standards from beauty product manufacturers and retailers. Black consumers alone spend on average \$6 to \$7 billion on beauty care products annually and buy nine times as many products compared to White consumers. However, communities of color are not yet the focus of the clean beauty movement. Manufacturers and retailers have a key role to play in the beauty justice movement and ensuring equitable access to safe products. Strategic partnerships like the ones that EDF are initiating are key to ensuring that beauty brands and retailers understand their role in transforming the beauty industry.

In the next episode, we'll continue this conversation when we talk with Heather McKenney from The Honest Company, a clean personal care and beauty product brand. Thanks so much for joining us for this episode of Beauty + Justice. Help us get more folks listening to the podcast. Tell a friend and leave a rating and a review wherever you listen to podcasts. Be well listeners.

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