

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Hira Aftab. She is the founder of [Our World Too](#), a global storytelling platform dedicated to rehumanizing the narrative surrounding refugees and displaced communities around the world. She is also a communications expert in the humanitarian and international development sector and has experience working in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the U.K. on projects relating to refugee support and access to justice. Hira holds a master's degree in international relations and a second master's degree in humanitarianism, conflict and development. She is also the host of the [More Than a Statistic](#) podcast and she is the co-founder of the [Hybrid Tours](#), a travel company dedicated to combining recreation and human rights for those interested in leaving a positive mark as a tourist.

Hira, welcome to the show.

Hira Aftab: Hi Matt, thank you so much for having me.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here. As you know, I am such a big fan of you as a person and all of the amazing things that you are up to which we will dive into during this episode. But let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from today. I am in Washington D.C. today and where are you?

Hira Aftab: I'm in Nottingham, U.K.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to start off, I think with this interview talking a little bit about your family background, your family history. Can you share a little bit about your grandparent's experience during the partition of Pakistan and kind of take us back and maybe set the stage and the context and the timeframe for people that aren't familiar with that history for sure.

Hira Aftab: So, I will start this by saying a lot of the experiences I learned of that my grandparents went through were from my mom and her siblings. I was very young when they passed away, so it wasn't something I had the opportunity to discuss with them.

So, my granddad was actually already on the side that would eventually become Pakistan, so I'm not entirely sure how his experiences were. But for my grandmother, she was actually from a small town or village, I'm not entirely sure, in Gurdaspur, and she stayed there with her mom and her siblings. And her mom was a single mom because her dad had passed away early, and they basically grew up in colonial ruled, what was India at that point. And it had been hundreds of years of colonial rule at this point.

There had been divisions sewn between different groups for the Muslims, the Hindus, the Sikhs, and there's a lot of distrust. People were still living as neighbors and friends, though. And there were talks of partition happening. One partition did happen, it was by someone called Cyril Radcliffe. He is a Serb, but I'm sorry, you don't get to mess up two countries and expect me to be respectful at the end of it. He had never been east of Paris before, and he basically drew a line across a map and divided India. And then he had Pakistan and East Pakistan, which eventually, then later on became Bangladesh.

And this was in 1947. And my grandma at the time, or Nani, as you say in Urdu, was visiting her sister in Lahore with her siblings. So, they'd basically just pack for the summer. They'd closed up the house, and my great grandmother had come to pick her and her siblings up. But when she arrived in

Lahore, she'd heard partition happen, and she went to the train station multiple times to try and see if they could cross the border, to try and see if they could go back. But eventually she was stopped. And they basically said, you can't go back. It's very dangerous now. Come and stay with us.

So, they ended up living long term with my Nani's oldest sister and her husband, and they all went to school there. They had to rebuild their lives there. And this was all the information I learned when I know we'll discuss it later on. When I spent that year in Pakistan, it wasn't something that was necessarily discussed beforehand. And even learning about Pakistan and his history was something even very recent for me. It wasn't something I had really grown up with an interest in.

Matt Bowles: From the stories that your parents have told you, can you share now a little bit about your parents' experience growing up in Pakistan, how they met, and then eventually their immigration journey that led them to the U.K.?

Hira Aftab: So, my dad grew up in Peshawar, so it was very far from the partition lines in Punjab. My mother, however, did grow up there and they were the first generation after partition and it was really interesting. I think her experience was unique in itself because they grew up as an army family. My granddad was in the army. They're six siblings together. So, they were all born in different places in Pakistan. So, they literally lived everywhere.

How they met is my parents are both doctors. They ended up working in the same hospital. And my uncle and my dad were actually very good friends, and I think he became family friends and they kind of met and took it from there. And then I think my grandparents helped too. And then I think the move to the U.K. was very much that further education has kind of weighs more. If you go to a country in the global north, I don't think that's something we can ignore and there may be more opportunities and it's more highly paid.

So, a lot of people, my friends, parents included, ended up kind of making that move.

Matt Bowles: So, I want to ask you also, of course about your experience growing up in a Pakistani immigrant home in the U.K., but you also lived and grew up in Saudi Arabia. Can you share a little bit about that experience and when you think back as you were coming up, how you navigated your Pakistani identity when you were living in the U.K., when you were living in Saudi Arabia and take us on that journey a little bit, how that was for you.

Hira Aftab: So, I think it's been really interesting. I do think I 100 embody a third culture, kid. I've taken different parts of being what it means to be Pakistani, what it means to be British and what it means to have grown up in Saudi and kind of we've made our own culture as a family.

So, it was really interesting because I was born in the U.K. and for a lot of the initial years I. I'm not going to say I remember much; I just remember it being very cold and I remember my dad had to work a lot and we spent a lot of time with my mom. But my grandma used to come to visit when she was alive, and we had aunts coming over and uncles and we had a lot of friends here.

But then going to Saudi the first time again, I remember more because I was older, and I remember it was a lot of fun. And I think it's really interesting because I've been through the, the American, the Scottish and the English school systems and they've all been quite different. But it's been an interesting learning curve, and I just remember the different distinct parts of my life that I can

associate with each country. But overall, it's been a very interesting experience, very rewarding. And I've met some of the most amazing people I've ever met because I moved so much.

Matt Bowles: I relate to that because I moved a good bit growing up as a kid, mostly inside the United States when I was young. And then eventually, obviously, I've been traveling the world since. But I do think that is one of the most amazing benefits of travel and living in different places. And sometimes as a kid, you're like, I don't want to move and leave my friends. But then you get there, then you're like, oh, wow, this is really different. It's really interesting. Different people here and stuff. And so, I've had a lot of those experiences myself.

I want to ask you about some specific experiences and particular reflections on these different points of your childhood. One of them is, I want to go back to the September 11 attacks, when those happened. You were living in Scotland at the time, in a primarily white area with not a lot of other Muslim families there. Can you share a little bit about how old you were at that time and when you think back to that period, what was that experience and environment like for you?

Hira Aftab: So, I was 10, I think, when it happened. I just remember there being a lot of news reports. I don't remember being very up to date with what was happening. But you obviously heard adults speaking. You kind of heard the media rhetoric and how they were trying to portray basically Muslims. And you're, you're 10 years old, but you kind of pick up on a lot of it. I think all together, there were seven, there were brown kids in our, we were all South Asian. So, there was me and my brother, my sister, we were Pakistani. And then there's another family who had four, therefore Indian boys.

It was interesting because a lot of the times when the kids would say things, I don't think they understood what they were saying. They just kind of said attacks were happening, this was happening. Oh, why is it these people, but they're nine and 10 years old, obviously they're repeating what they heard at home. And it was interesting because I remember the world changing really rapidly and people becoming hyper vigilant, especially if you're Muslim or if you look Muslim, if you wore the hijab. I didn't wear the hijab then, but it was really interesting to see that change overnight. And obviously traveling got a lot harder, especially if you were any kind of color or if you had any sort of Muslim name.

So that was really interesting. But then on another level, it was the fact that Pakistan then got involved because the U.S. were using their bases. There were attacks happening in Pakistan and for a long time I don't think we went back. We went back to the summer of 2001 before the attacks, and we went back again in 2005, and we didn't go to Peshawar. We couldn't go for many, many years because it wasn't safe. And my dad just refused to take us.

So, there were a lot of knock-on effects of that. But I think there was a more awareness I think you get as a kid that you will be judged differently, and you will be made to apologize for things that weren't really your fault.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about the period when you moved back to Saudi Arabia about four years later after that in 2005 as a teenager and what that transition was like and what your experience was?

Hira Aftab: So, I hadn't lived there since I think '99 and my dad was suddenly, oh, hey, let's go back again. We're like, me and my brother, my brother was older, my sister was pretty young then. We're like, oh, we don't want to go back. What do you mean? We're leaving England. He basically gave us a proposal. He was like, we'll spend a year there. If you don't like it and if in a year you tell me to come back, we'll move back.

So, we moved to Saudi and because we'd been there before, it wasn't so difficult because we didn't have those preconceived notions. But we moved back, and we loved it. And my dad asked us a year later and he said, do you want to go back to the U.K.? We're like, no, we're good here. So, I ended up, we ended up there for five years. Well, I was there for five years because then I graduated high school.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about the international school experience that you had when you were living in Saudi? What types of people you were surrounded by when you were attending the international school and what that experience was like and the impact it had on you?

Hira Aftab: So, I think school in Saudi was a very interesting subject to talk about. I remember the first school I actually went to; it wasn't an international school in the sense of the British or the American or the French school. It was a, I don't even know if you call them an Arabic school. It's called Manarat and it was an international school. And they had four different sections. One was English girls, one was Arabic girls, one was Arabic boys, one was English boys. So, there's four different sections to the same school.

It was really interesting. We come from something that's so strictly regimented in the U.K., and you go and now you're in Saudi and it really wasn't that regimented. And you're just, you can't talk like that to your teachers. What are you guys doing? And it was really interesting. But I did make one of my best friends in that school.

So, it was a really good experience overall and it really gave me an understanding of, well, Arabic. That's the first time I started learning Arabic. And it was a great experience overall because there were so many people from so many different walks of life, well, girls, but from so many different backgrounds. It was just really interesting to see the cultural differences, the cultural similarities and kind of how that either gelled or didn't work in certain circumstances. So right after that school I ended up in the British International School which was really interesting because my brother and sister had been there from the beginning, but they didn't have a 11th and 12th grade class until I think it's 2008. So, we were literally the inaugural year for this school.

It was very interesting again because you had a whole other group of people because where you had a lot more people from the global north and you had a lot of people who are diaspora basically who'd grown up in different countries and I shouldn't say Saudi diaspora, Pakistani diaspora, people who had grown up in the global north but found themselves in Saudi, which is really interesting. That was fun. I think those two years, if I ever had to repeat years of my life again, would probably be those two.

We had this giant building that was made specifically for the 11th and 12th grade class, and we were the only 11th grade class. So, we got the entire thing to ourselves. And again, met one of my best friends again in that school. So, I met both of them in Riyadh and it was absolutely incredible

because you made these amazing friends. They were still figuring out a lot of things in the school because we were in the first year. But overall, it was a great experience, and I think it was fun.

Matt Bowles: And then when you graduated, what was your decision-making process in terms of where you wanted to go to university?

Hira Aftab: So, in Saudi, the thing is, back then especially there weren't a lot of higher education institute, so it really wasn't an option to stay. You could go to another country in the Middle east, you could go to something in the Gulf, but then they always had issues with converting your degree if you get it from another part of the world and then you coming to the U.K. So that was kind of out of the option.

Another option was going to Pakistan, but as a true diaspora, no. So, I moved to the U.K. again because we'd lived there before, and it just seemed a logical move really. And the British universities are much better.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also want to ask you about some of your other travel experiences that you subsequently had, going to very different places like East Asia, Southeast Asia. Can you talk about your experience spending time in Japan and Korea and Southeast Asia?

Hira Aftab: I think a lot of that traveling can be attributed to living in Saudi or my parents still being in Saudi because it was so accessible to go to the rest of, well, the Middle east and Asia. And I absolutely loved it when we went to South Korea and went to Japan. And right before we went to South Korea, firstly, I've always watched anime, so I really wanted to go to Japan. It's going to be so basic, but I love Pikachu. It's like my little mascot. And I really wanted to go to Japan, and my parents were like, oh, why don't we add South Korea to that?

And someone at the time introduced me to K-pop. And I didn't listen to a lot of it before then, but I listened to so much. By the time we got to South Korea, I knew all the bands, I knew all the members. This is back in 2015. I don't even know if they're active anymore, but absolutely loved it. Loved going, sparked my whole interest in Korean beauty.

But it was really interesting because when we went to Seoul at the time, I think the first thing we saw was an outside exhibition of countries that had helped South Korea during the war, I think from 1950 to 1953. And there were a bunch of different countries listed. Pakistan was listed. I was so surprised because I'm like, oh, this is interesting. And at that time, I didn't know. I'm not going to say I'm a self-professed expert in Pakistani history, but I knew even less than I did now.

So, I was like, oh, that's interesting. I didn't know we helped countries like that. And as we walked around, we learned more about the comfort women that were used during the Korean War and how the colonization of South Korea in general by Japan. And that was interesting because I never really thought about colonization. But we'd heard of colonization from the global north, but how did that look when it was a country? I don't think Japan is in the global south, but we should say an Asian country.

And it was really interesting to learn that. And we went to, I shouldn't say interesting, it was really sad to learn that. And then we also went and visited the DMZ, and they have binoculars so you can look into North Korea. And I think from the North Korean side they've set up basically what is a

propaganda city. There's a bunch of skyscrapers, there's a bunch of really very well-developed roads and everything. It was really interesting to see that.

And also, the 38th parallel, which I didn't know anything about at the time. And I'm still learning, learning about, but I think learning that about a country that essentially you listen to K-pop, you'll watch the K-dramas. But I think at that time I just hadn't watched anything that dealt with what is essentially the partition of Korea. And then going to Japan after that.

It was a really good experience. I did enjoy it. But I also started looking not a little more critically. Japan is a great country, I'm going to say. But then we also started learning about how called Imperial Japan had acted, how it had kind of colonized countries around it. And then we also went to Hiroshima, we went to ground Zero where the, I think it's observatory. And you saw the absolute destruction that nuclear weapons can have.

And you saw, I think the son of a survivor, he was there collecting signatures to sign a petition that basically said we should end all nuclear war. And you're sitting there looking at this and you're like, how have we not learned?

So, I think it was a very eye-opening trip in general. But then we also went to Thailand. We went multiple times over that time period that we were in Saudi, and it was, I think, one of the only countries that wasn't colonized. And it was incredible. And they are very proud of it. And they talk about their history, and they talk about their culture. And it's really interesting to see how all of these different countries have kind of progressed over the same time because I kind of keep comparing it to Pakistan. And it's very interesting those different levels of progression and where they started and where they are now.

Matt Bowles: Well, one of the things that you and I have very deeply connected on is our Palestine solidarity activist work that you and I both do and have been committed to for quite some time. I want to talk a little bit about your journey, first of all, coming to consciousness on the question of Palestine and then also get into the trip that you took to Palestine and what your experience was like. So can you just share a little bit of background, just in terms of your personal journey, becoming aware of the Palestinian struggle and connecting with that and deciding that you wanted to be in solidarity.

Hira Aftab: I think just before I answer that, I do want to say the only reason I'm a humanitarian and activist today is because of Palestine. And the only reason I learned about everything I have learned so far is because of what I learned about Palestine. And as far as it comes to when I first learned about it, there is no pinpoint because we always had Palestinians growing up around us. They were our neighbors; they were our friends. And you understood that there was a conflict there, you kind of understood that there was apartheid, but you didn't necessarily recognize how bad the situation was. And I remember I went with a friend in 2011 when I was doing my undergrad, and we went to a Palestine protest. And that was the first time I'd ever been.

And I remember after that I started listening to this artist called Loki. And if you haven't heard of him, I 100% recommend you do. And when I started listening to his songs, he introduced so many topics. I was like, how have I not heard about this before? He talked about Palestine, he talked about the U.S. involvement in it, he talked about the weapons industry, he talked about all of this

kind of draws together. I think that was also instrumental in me kind of going on that journey of learning more about Palestine, about human rights, about history in general.

And then in 2016, I did have the opportunity to go to Palestine. And before I start this story, I think I do preface it by saying that if I knew then what I know now, I might not have taken the trip because I've met so many Palestinians since then who kind of turn around and say, but we can go to Palestine. And I think in solidarity with them, I probably would not have gone. But back then, 2016 was kind of the beginning of my journey. And we went to Jordan for a family vacation and my parents suggested, hey, let's cross, let's see if we can get into Palestine.

So, we went across the land border. We were stopped for five hours at the border and my parents' passports got stamped. And the reasoning was, if you're over 50, you're not a threat. Basically, me and my brother and sister, ours weren't. And we were just kept there. They didn't ask us anything, they just gave us weird looks, occasionally came to like to go over our bags with these random devices, kind of looked over our shoulders to see what we were doing in our phone. I think at one point my mom just turned around and was like, do you want to look at my phone? I can just give it to you. Just ask. And then he just walked away.

So, for five hours we were kept, not kept, it wasn't detained. We just sat there. We sat there because they had our passports. And my parents had basically very clearly stated before the trip that it's all or none of us. So, we either all cross or we all go back. But eventually, after five hours, we got our passports. They were not stamped. It was a special slip that you get with your passport if you don't want your passport stamp. And it was so funny because he said, oh, make sure you only stick to our territories because we cannot guarantee your safety if you go to Palestinian held areas. We're like, yeah, for sure. And we left.

And as soon as we left it was amazing because it was, I think, nighttime at that time. But the next day we went to Ariha and I'm going to be using the Palestinian names for places. So, we went to Ariha, and we met these amazing people. We're selling these Palestinian grown, I think, medjool dates. And we bought so many boxes and they were the most amazing thing we've ever tried.

And we went to Al-Aqsa, and it was literally like walking back in time. It was the walk to the Damascus Gate. You were going through these cobblestone streets, and you were going to what is the third holiest site in Islam. And it was amazing because so many people don't get the opportunity, Palestinians don't get the opportunity, let alone other Muslims.

But I remember the first night was amazing. No one really said anything. We went for morning prayers and as we were coming out, we saw the IOF with a bunch of settlers just walking through protesting in the grounds of Al-Aqsa. It was surreal to see it in real life because you'd reposted things so many times. You had kind of shared people's experiences so many times. But this was the first time seeing it in real life. And then if you went to another part of the mosque, they just walked in with their shoes on and you were just looking at them going, oh, okay, you don't respect people, of course you're going to disrespect the building.

And then you just started picking up on things. If you were walking, the IOF soldiers would turn their guns towards you. Or my brother's walking ahead of us in one instance and this tiny IOF guy barely makes it to his chest, comes and steps in front of him and my mom sees what's happening. She

Runs to him like, oh, he's, my son. We're British, or here. And the only reason he let us through is because we're British and we're Pakistani. If we were Palestinian, he would have stopped him there. Like, he wouldn't have been allowed anywhere near the mosque.

And then we started going outside to Bethlehem, for example. That was much nicer as an experience because the A is under Palestinian Authority. And it was an absolutely incredible experience. And we went to Al Khalil, and it was. I think you see the worst there because Palestinians had one road.

And I remember. I mean, you hear about Palestine again, but you never realize the extent of the difficulties people face there. And we were walking down the one road to go to the Ibrahimi Mosque, and you see people selling. Palestinians are selling things on the side. So, my mom goes up to someone because she liked a magnet or something. She's like, oh, it's chipped in the corner. Do you have another one? He's like, no, we don't have anything. Whatever you see is what we have.

And I remember she didn't say anything after that. She just bought whatever she had. Whatever cash we had, we gave because we had nothing else at that time because we didn't realize the extent of the apartheid and the oppression. And we went to the mosque, and we prayed in the mosque, and there was a bathroom outside, and the lady cleaning it was Palestinian. And she asked me, she offhandedly my very broken Arabic. She's like, oh, where are you from? What are you doing here? And I'm like, oh, we're visiting. And she's like, oh, have you gone to Al-Aqsa? And I'm like, I have. And she just looks into the distance and she's like, I'm really happy for you, but I can never go because my permit will never be approved.

And then you look at her and you look at this watchtower right above the Ibrahimi Mosque, and you're just, this is insane. There's no one who should be living like this. They're literally treated like animals. And you go and you see the apartheid wall and you see all of the pictures online. Do not do it justice. And I think one of the biggest things after coming back from that, even seeing the genocide now, is what you're seeing on your screen is 1 million times worse on the ground.

So, I think that Palestine trip, I think after that, it was just, you can sit here, and you can be ignorant your entire life, or you can do something about it. And I think that was a point that I decided I don't want to stay silent about things like this.

Matt Bowles: So, let's talk about that journey from there forward. I want to ask about the graduate work that you decided to do and your master's degree in humanitarianism and international development. Can you take us a little bit on that journey and what that graduate experience was like for you?

Hira Aftab: So, my undergrad was actually in business, and I remember when I was deciding what to do for a Master's, I had a random course I took in my third year, and it's something to do the EU agriculture policy. I'm like, oh, wow, interesting. So, I started kind of googling around it, and I came across international relations. I'm like, oh, this is interesting. And this was before the Palestine trip, so this is 2013 to 2014. And I was like, oh, maybe this is an interesting thing to do.

And when I started the course, it was interesting at the time, but I felt it was very, very heavy on the theory. And there wasn't a lot of practical experience. There weren't a lot of practitioners coming from the international development or humanitarian sector to actually talk about their experiences.

It was just very like, this is liberalism, this is realism, this is feminism, and just being expected to kind of memorize it, so to speak.

So, when I had some more professional experience and I came across the second master's, which was in humanitarianism, conflict development, I'm like, oh, my God, I have to do this. Because I read through the course and I'm like, this is what I want to do. It has real life experience, has people who already had that experience, and it's not all theory. And I applied and thankfully I got in.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to ask you about one of the trips that you took during your program to Jordan, and if you can share a little bit about that particular trip, your encounters on that trip with refugees from Syria and Palestine and so forth, and how that trip impacted you.

Hira Aftab: So, I think this is one of the reasons I'll forever be grateful that I did that second Masters, because the majority of it was actually online, but then we had three or four residentials, and one of them was actually in Jordan. So, one of our lecturers went and organized this entire trip to Jordan. We're like, oh, my God, this is going to be amazing.

So, we went to Jordan. We saw the work of a bunch of different ingos, local organizations, and we saw a Palestinian, they call it a refugee campus, not a refugee camp anymore, because they've been there for so long. There's it's basically their fixed structures, their buildings. And I think that was the first time we learned about the difference in the legal status of a 1948 Palestinian refugee and a 1967 Palestinian refugee.

And I think even just learning that was very interesting because we didn't realize there were classifications of refugees at that point. It was just, they're Palestinian refugees. But then some people got the nationality. If you came in 1948, 1967, you didn't. And that was, I think, really eye opening in general. And it kind of got me thinking about, okay, so you have refugees, a group that are largely disenfranchised, largely stereotyped, and then you have categories within these refugees. And that was the first time it kind of came across my radar.

And then we went to Camp Azraq, and this was a life-changing experience, if you will. We went to Camp Azraq, and it was a camp in the middle of the Jordanian desert for Syrian refugees. And now imagine, if you will, being in the middle of a desert in a corrugated metal sheet. That's what they were made out of. It wasn't the traditional tents that refugee camps are made out of. It was sheets and people were getting second degree burns when they were touching the walls of their supposed house.

And I remember there were some engineers working on a project to cool down the accommodation. And I went up to him and he was, I think, someone from the global North. I can't remember exactly where he's from. And I asked him, I'm like, oh, why don't you invite engineers from the global South? They're used to working with less resources. I mean, it's true, just a fact. And he's like, no. I'm like, okay. Then I was like, why don't you just ask the people in the camp? Obviously, they must have ideas of how they can improve their housing situation. He looks me dead in the eyes and goes, all the good ones are gone. I'm standing there looking at him like, how do you so brazenly say that?

And it's kind of. It brought back all my experiences and all the experiences I think I've learned of so far, that it's a good immigrant, bad immigrant rhetoric, and how you stereotype an entire group of people just because you think they have nothing to offer. I'm like, have you talked to them? And he's

like, no. And I think literally that night we went back to the hotel we were staying at, and I turned to my friend, I'm like, listen, I have an idea. I'm starting this organization. I'm going to do it. And that's how [Our World Too](#) was born.

Matt Bowles: Let's talk a little bit about that. Can you share what the concept was for [Our World Too](#) at the time and then talk about the evolution of the platform and what it is today?

Hira Aftab: So, [Our World Too](#), at the very basis of what it is, is a storytelling platform to rehumanize the narrative around refugees and displaced communities around the world. And I chose storytelling because in South Asian culture, it's such a huge part of the culture. And it's how I learned my own grandmother's story because it'd been passed down.

And it's how you can destroy media narratives because if you hear from the source, you cannot dehumanize them anymore. At that time, the 'refugee crisis' had already happened in Europe. You already had these stereotypes about being undeserving, about being terrorists, about coming to change European values, about taking over our land, whatever it was. But no one had ever asked or there was very limited engagement with people who had that experience. And it just struck me as odd as, why are you speaking for a whole group of people who clearly have a voice? You just don't listen to them.

So, it very much started off that, and it started off on social media and on our website. But I think very quickly we realized that because of TikTok and the invention of short form video content, a lot of people aren't going to scroll through 10 carousel slides. They're not going to sit through reading paragraphs on a website. So, we had to adapt over the years. So that's where [More Than a Statistic](#) as a podcast came in, because everyone listens to podcasts. I definitely listened to yours. I listened to a bunch of other podcasts. I'm like, that's amazing. So many people listen, and they are willing to engage with these topics.

So, I started interviewing people and reaching back out to people I interviewed before. I'm like, hey, would you want to do this podcast instead? So essentially, it was just another way to get that message about showing the people behind the statistics, behind the news, behind the rhetoric, the negative rhetoric, politicians in the media show and. And putting them in front of the camera, so to speak, so that they can define themselves on their terms.

Matt Bowles: Well, I definitely want to encourage people to listen to the [More Than a Statistic](#) podcast. So, wherever you are listening to this episode, as soon as it is over, you can just type in *More Than a Statistic* and that will come up on your podcast platform. I have listened to many of your episodes as you know, I've been texting you feedback on a whole bunch of them. And there are so some really, really important guests and stories and educational information in that podcast that I think are incredibly important for people to hear.

So, you do a fantastic job with everything from the guest selection to the interviews. You really drew out some important things and so I want to encourage people to check that out. We're also, of course, going to link it up in [the show notes](#) and you can find everything we discuss in the show notes at [themaverickshow.com](#) you can go to the show notes for this episode. If people want to check out and learn more about [Our World Too](#), Hira and see some of the stuff you're doing with that, what's the best way for them to learn more about that?

Hira Aftab: Well, you can follow us. We're on [Instagram](#). We have a website, www.ourworldtoo.org.uk

Matt Bowles: Awesome. We're going to link all that stuff up in [the show notes](#) so you can just go there and find direct links to everything that we are discussing here.

Hira, I want to ask you now, since you've had these personal experiences in Jordan that you were talking about and you have finished your master's degrees in these topics, now that you reflect back on this and the things that you have learned and the things that you have seen, can you share a little bit about some of the critiques that you have developed about the dynamics in the humanitarian sector overall that people should be aware of and conscious of that people might not initially even know about or understand?

Hira Aftab: I could talk about this forever. When I started in the humanitarian sector, I did go into it with very rose-tinted glasses and I was like, this is amazing. This is sector I want to be and I'm going to make such a big change. A lot of people might go into it. Maybe not as much now, but definitely the case back in the day. And I kind of always knew early on it's an area I wanted to go into.

But kind of as my experiences went on, as I started learning more about global systems, about the world, about the experiences of my grandmother, it became very apparent that it wasn't everything it was cracked up to be. I think the first thing that kind of struck me was double standards. If I'm talking about my own experience, and this is also a friend's experiences as well. We've talked about across the board. If you're a person of color coming into the sector, you're going to have to work twice as hard to get the same position someone who is white will probably just get given.

You can have the master's degrees, you can have the languages, you can have the experience, but I've realized that if my overseas experience, when I was in Saudi, no one counted in the U.K. even though people are vying for those international positions to get out of the U.K. to go there. But my experience there didn't count. There was a lot of racism in even the hiring process. I remember someone point blank asked me, how can you believe in this cause if you're Muslim?

So, I had to start reciting religious text to him, Hadith. And I'm like, what do you mean that I can't believe in this cause? And it was to do with the death penalty. And I think there's so much misinformation about Islam in general that people, one, need to educate themselves if they want to hire Muslims. It's not my job to start educating you in the middle of an interview. So that was very apparent.

And I think also, unfortunately, there is still this dynamic, a very colonial dynamic in the humanitarian sector. And now, as a bit of a background to the sector, it was built on the foundations or the ruins of colonization. So, when countries started to 'decolonize', for example, in India and Pakistan, the people who had been former colonizers were later rehired to provide famine relief in the same places where they had caused famines because they had knowledge of the areas. And there were people, we're going to have to say it straight, the Red Cross. Henry Dunant was a colonizer. He was on his way to Algeria to colonize when he saw people suffering, was like, oh, we need to do something about it.

But a lot of that is swept under the rug. And if you start questioning it, you are often blacklisted, to be honest. And it's happened to me, it's happened to my friends in this sector, there's this

overwhelming expectation that you should just be happy to be involved because you're doing amazing work. And they should never question the origins. You should never question anything that's kind of going wrong.

And then also diversity hire, unfortunately, came into the picture where you were hired, but you were hired because you look a certain way. It wasn't because of your opinions. It wasn't because of your experiences or your professional skills. It was just so you could look good on their company website. But you were basically, again, you were just kind of pigeonholed as doing basic, nominal tasks. It wasn't anything substantial. And then I kind of started to realize whenever we gave people opinions about. Don't portray people this way because you have refugees. You have a whole bunch of organizations helping refugees, but you're calling the beneficiaries. You're not listening to them. Apart from when it comes to fundraising dinners or impact reports. They have voices outside of this. Why aren't you centering them in your programming? Why aren't you centering them in your planning?

And they never did. We got this funding from this organization. They want to prioritize this. It doesn't matter what people want. And they always end up prioritizing what the funder wants, even though as an organization, they exist to help, for example, refugees. And it feels very much like fast fashion, to be honest. One day it's Syrian refugees and it's Palestinians, then it's Ukrainians, then it was Bosnians, then it was the Rohingyas, then it's Uyghurs, and it just keeps changing every couple of months. Their problems as communities don't go away. It's just that the funders are suddenly, oh, there's more money here. We want you to shift your entire focus here. And if you want to survive, you have to shift as well.

Large organizations are often run like corporations, which is sad, and they end up prioritizing profits and funders over the people they should be helping. And then there's the whole issue of people's voices getting suppressed, especially if you're from what is a former colony, because there are still those, how should I say, there are different levels, basically. It's really interesting because you will talk about, for example, things like neutrality and impartiality, and those are very important principles. But how are they constructed? How are they enacted?

So, if you say neutrality and two people are on the ground and they both need help, for sure you help them. But then if you look at neutrality, me and my friends have asked each other these questions a lot. Is it then a privilege for certain groups and it's not for others? Because, for example, if you take Palestine, if you take Muslims, if you take people who have been formerly colonized, our very identities at certain points get politicized. How then do we stay neutral in that situation?

And then, for example, we won't be selected for being country leads. I would be looked over for being country lead in Pakistan, for example, because I wouldn't be looked as being neutral. But someone who served as a soldier in Afghanistan will be selected for being the country director in Afghanistan. And I don't understand how their neutrality cannot be questioned, whereas mine will be. So, there was a lot of double standards that are startlingly clear in the sector and the roots of colonization. Even though they're buzzwords like decolonization, localization going around, there is nothing actively being done to move them beyond just definitions on an induction pack. There's none of that happening.

And then also people's voices, especially if you're from the Global south, whether you're a professional, whether you're a refugee, whether you're an asylum seeker, whether your local staff are always marginalized. And that is honestly the reality of the humanitarian sector. There are good pockets of work, do not get me wrong, but a lot of this compounded is what led and continues to direct the work of [Our World Too](#).

Matt Bowles: All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. For direct links to everything we have discussed in this episode, including all of the ways to find, follow and connect with Hira and to get your \$100 The Maverick Show listener discount on her upcoming [Hybrid Tours](#). You can find all of that in one place. Just go [the show notes](#) for this episode and there you will find it. And remember to tune in to [the next episode](#) to hear the conclusion of my interview with Hira Aftab. Good night, everybody.