

## **Race and Equality**

### *Hidden Burdens*

#### **Tessy Mbofung and Joan Simons:**

JOAN SIMONS: Did you have any other challenges you wanted to talk about?

TESSY MBOFUNG: Yeah, so I spoke earlier about the challenges that you have a whole village looking up to you, because in Africa, they say a child is brought up by a village, so not just by your parents. So, you have a whole village looking up to you. When a city and a half people, just people in my neighbourhood texting me and saying that, oh, your mom gave me your number, because that's how they operate.

I went to see your mom today. Your mom gives me your number. And hope you're doing OK. My child's school is starting in September, and I'm not able to pay John's fees because there's no way I can. I can't. I don't have the money.

How much is the fees, John? It's probably something like 15 pounds for a child's fees for the whole year. And a child would not go to school if the parents cannot pay the fee.

So, my responsibility, though, is not limited to just my immediate family. It's almost everybody that I know. Even people that I don't know that my parents know.

So those are some of the hidden burdens that I would say most Black and Asian people carry, because, I believe, we have the same culture, in that sense. So, when you see me around, and I think this is where white privilege comes in, some of the things I have to go through, my responsibility is not limited to maybe my husband and my kids. It goes further.

And then you sit back here. And I'm just going to mention something which I'm sure most Black and Asian people would relate to what I'm saying. So, Africa has been very unsteady recently. The world, generally, to be honest. I mean, we just recently saw what happened to George Floyd in America.

And it's just gone on in Africa. But clearly there's been a lot of unrest in various countries. Nigeria, obviously, has been struggling with SARS. Cameroon, where I come from, children have not been able to freely go to school for over two years. There's been serious unrest in the country for four years now. And for two years, students have not been able to go to school.

So, I'm an HR business partner. I have very important meetings that I am expected to attend and contribute and have a normal frame of mind to contribute to those meetings. These are some of the challenges I face.

I wake up in the morning-- for example, this is yesterday I'm talking about. My country is in such an unrest, and it's something that happens all the time, Joan. I wake up in the morning, and I have to attend a meeting, a proper meeting where I'm expected to contribute.

Look at my phone, or the first message I get, or I look at my phone, the first thing I see is how children have attempted to go to school because the government has said, well, we'll sort this issue out. Can you just send children to school? Children have attempted to go to school. And for the first day, gunmen just come and blast. I see pictures of children with their heads blown because they've gone to school. I'm talking about little children who have done nothing to deserve. They don't know.

So that's what I see in various forms every day. Yet, I have to carry on, pushing myself to feed my family. I have to sit in a meeting. I need to go to work to be able to earn a living. So those are some of the hidden burdens that people like myself have, which most people would not understand unless I tell you about it.

Which is, again, the reason why I think this awareness is very important, because if we just do a little bit to understand where people come from, understand a bit about the background, or their cultures and beliefs, perhaps we'll be more conscious or cautious on how we relate with them. And I've been very lucky. I would say I've been very lucky because most of the times, I've been able to decide that I'm not going to be under pressure. I'm not going to feel stressed. Most of the times, I'm in that position where if I'm under so much stress, I can decide to just take a break.

I'm conscious that there are other people, Black people like myself, who, perhaps, are not in that position. And sometimes I'm sure some people might be wondering why is she like that. Why is she not-- but it's not an excuse. The message I'm trying to pass is that people of my colour have a lot of hidden burdens.

You can see me as a maybe an able-bodied Black woman, but only 5% of me is alive because of the things that I have in me. So, it's just a message to say we need to be aware,

and we need to try and treat people fairly. Try to be open, and kind to people, and have discussions. Feel free to come and ask me about where I come from, my race, my beliefs, my values. And I'll talk to you about it because I'd feel really pleased. I would be very happy if somebody asked me and wants to understand that.