

Episode 11: Special Episode—Dr. Tina Opie on Shared Sisterhood

Overview: How can we make meaningful progress on equity and inclusion? Now that we've busted many different myths about gender and the economy, you might be wondering about more concrete steps you can take to change inequality in your workplace and daily life. On this special episode, Dr. Tina Opie shares three practices for dismantling systemic inequities from her book *Shared Sisterhood: How to Take Collective Action for Racial and Gender Equity at Work*, co-authored with Dr. Beth A. Livingston. This special episode was written and produced by the team at our sister podcast, Rotman Visiting Experts.

Featured Guest: Dr. Tina Opie, Associate Professor of Management at Babson College; Founder of Opie Consulting Group

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Research Mentioned

1. Opie, T. and Livingston, B.A. (2022). *Shared Sisterhood: How to Take Collective Action for Racial and Gender Equity at Work*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Transcript:

Sonia Kang: Welcome to Busted, a podcast by the Institute for Gender and the Economy, otherwise known as GATE. We team up with leading experts to bust prominent myths about gender and the economy and give you the tools you need to bust each myth yourself. I'm Dr. Sonia Kang, Canada Research Chair in Identity, Diversity, and Inclusion at the University of Toronto, and my pronouns are she and her.

Carmina Ravanera: And I'm Carmina Ravanera, Senior Research Associate at GATE, and my pronouns are she and her. Today we've got an exciting guest episode! Back in January, Dr. Tina Opie visited us at the Rotman School of Management to speak about her book called *Shared Sisterhood: How To Take Collective Action For Racial and Gender Equity At Work*, which she co-authored with Beth A. Livingston. She also spoke on one of Rotman's podcasts, *Visiting Experts*, and offered some great insights for how workplaces can more effectively work towards racial and gender equity. So we'll be featuring that episode today.

Sonia: Yeah. I think this will be really helpful because listeners will be able to use some of Tina's ideas in combination with the myth-busting insights we've been sharing in our previous episodes to take action for more equitable and inclusive workplaces.

Carmina: Definitely. We've talked a lot about what causes different inequalities in the economy, from cultural norms to gender roles. So hearing from her about how to come together to change these inequalities is a great next step. *Shared Sisterhood* offers some really concrete actions that all of us can do to make change, not just at work but also in our everyday lives.

Sonia: So without further ado, let's get into it!

Brett Hendrie: 2021 was apparently a record year for Fortune 500 companies in terms of gender representation. Compared to 2002, there was an almost 600 per cent increase in the number of fortune 500 companies headed by women. But look behind those numbers. And you'll see that still only 41 companies had female CEOs, that's less than 9 per cent. At this rate, it'll be the year 2,142 before we reach gender parity for corporate chief executives. Look even deeper, and ask how many black women are in charge of fortune 500 companies — there's two to be precise, less than half a percent. When it comes to racial and gender representation, all things are not equal. And the rate of change is not reflecting society at large. These inequities are true in the C-suite and also up and down all through corporate government and academic ranks. So how can we make meaningful progress on equity and inclusion? Well, it might be time for us to revisit our

views on sisterhood, and feminism. Welcome to Visiting Experts, a Rotman School podcast featuring backstage conversations on business and society with influential scholars, thinkers and leaders featured in our acclaimed speaker series.

I'm your host, Brett Hendrie, and I'm joined today by Tina Opie to talk about her new book, *Shared Sisterhood: How to Take Collective Action for Racial and Gender Equity at Work*, co-authored with Beth Livingston. In her book, Tina lays the groundwork that helps people dig into their own assumptions about race and gender. And she provides a roadmap to building troop alliances that can raise all women and lead to systemic change without leaving any group behind. Tina is an award-winning researcher and teacher. She's an associate professor of management at Babson College, and the founder of Opie Consulting Group, advising clients such as American Express, Hulu and MIT. Through her research, she's explored the relationship between race networks and entrepreneurship. And Tina has been a featured contributor to *Harvard Business Review*, the *Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe*. We are very excited to have Tina here at Rotman today. Welcome. Thank you for joining us,

Tina Opie: Brett. Thank you so much for having me.

Brett: Tina, you begin the book by painting a very clear picture that there's still a lot of work that businesses need to do to advance gender and racial equality. And although a lot of leaders are trying to dismantle systemic inequities, their approaches don't always work. And so you and Beth, your co-author have developed shared sisterhood is way to advance collective action. Can you share with our audience what was the inspiration behind the *Shared Sisterhood* philosophy?

Tina: Yes, thank you for that. So first, I should say I began working on *Shared Sisterhood* in 2009. And what motivated me to do that is when I looked around the workplace, I sort of asked myself, "If feminism is real, why aren't women across racio-ethnic differences helping each other? Why do we have these isolated pockets of people, women in particular, who are not communicating, who don't have relationships?" I'm married to a historian — Dr. Frederick Douglass Opie to be exact. And because he's a historian, our home is full of books. So I started reading on the history of the workforce, the history of labor history, etc. And what I found was that over decades and centuries, there's just been a lack of trust between women in the workplace. And by the way, it's called *Shared Sisterhood*, but anyone can be a sister regardless of gender. But the inspiration for *Shared Sisterhood* was trying to figure out how can we get equity in the workplace, with women and people who believe in women's equity working together? So that was the motivation for it. And I don't know if you want to talk later about what led to me then inviting Beth on but it was really an opportunity to examine how we could change the workplace for the better.

Brett: Well, let's talk about that. Because working with Beth as your co-author, you write in the book from your very different perspectives — you as a black woman, Beth as a white woman. Can you share about how that relationship developed? And how the two of you develop your own sisterhood?

Tina: It's sort of meta, the relationship that Beth and I developed demonstrates *Shared Sisterhood* at a micro level. When I first met Beth, I often joke it was not love at first sight, because she sort of bounded up to me at the Academy of Management right after I had delivered a research paper. And, again, I jokingly say, I didn't know if she was friendly, or if I should call for security. I didn't know what was happening. But she was very inquisitive and curious about my research, and I was always very friendly. But she seemed very interested in maybe friendship and a personal relationship. But I didn't know if I could trust her. And one of the things that I talked about in the book is how, unfortunately, you know, I've been in banking, consulting, academia and entrepreneurship. And in each of those contexts, I have experienced betrayal, and it's often been at the hands of white women. And so when Beth approached me, I immediately became defensive. And I then had to sort of challenge myself.

But fortunately, Beth and I realized we knew someone in common who could vouch for the other. And then we started interacting, doing some work together, working on research papers. And then I said, Beth, you know, I have this white paper that's sort of been shelved. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me. It sucks, basically. Would you be interested in writing this with me? Because I realized that if I was going to write a book about *Shared Sisterhood*, about people coming together across difference to dismantle systemic inequity, I needed to do it in sisterhood, and Beth was someone who I could trust to do that.

Brett: That's great. It's such a story that reflects the real intent of the philosophy behind it. Can you share with us our audience an understanding and an introduction to what is Shared Sisterhood, and maybe use the example with Beth to help illustrate it further? Or other examples?

Tina: We like to say that Shared Sisterhood is our radically optimistic philosophy on how we can dismantle inequity, and it's based on three practices: dig, bridge and collective action. And dig is about surfacing your own assumptions about identity. So using the story of Beth and I, when Beth approached me and I became defensive, I had to dig, I had to ask myself, "Girl, what is going on with you? Why is this woman who's all she's doing is being kind to you? Has she done anything to show that she's not trustworthy?" The answer was no.

So then I had to say, "What are you doing? Where is all this coming from?" And when I, did dig, what I realized is that I was not interacting with Beth as an individual, I was interacting with her sort of as a proxy for a collective of white women. And people might hear that and say, "Well, that is racism, or prejudicial." But I think it's time that we be honest with ourselves. Many of us have thoughts like that, but we're afraid or embarrassed of discussing them. So dig helps us to actually pull those private, perhaps ugly thoughts out and hold them up and interrogate them so that we can have a better understanding of ourselves.

The second practice is bridge. Again, using the study of Beth and I, bridge is about authentically connecting with somebody who's different than you. So I'm a Black Christian woman, and Beth is a white atheist woman. So we're different. When we try to connect with each other, and by authentic connection, we mean trust, risk taking, empathy and vulnerability — basically developing a relationship where you know, the other person has your back where they're willing to take your risks on your behalf.

And when Beth and I started to bridge, we bridged on things that we had in common. So we both love old school hip hop. We both like to dance. We both are mothers. We're both professors. We're both wives. So we would talk and compare notes, sometimes commiserate, sometimes cheerlead for the other. And we were able to establish a really trusting relationship based on those commonalities. And so when we did have conflicts, and an area of our difference, we could rely on that bridge because we had a solid foundation.

Brett: And that dig part is so important to understanding yourself first. Before you can bridge, and you talk very eloquently in the book about how if you don't really dig down and have that deep introspection the bridge isn't going to work. Can you share with us your observations or thoughts about how people can know if they're really digging deep enough to make an impact and be ready to bridge?

Tina: Yeah, so the beautiful thing about dig and bridge, it's an iterative process. So some people think, okay, I finished digging. Now I can just move on to bridge. Well, when you attempt to bridge with someone who's different than you, and they give you feedback that they don't want to bridge with you, it could be something about them. But what if it's something about you? So that's a signal.

And when you notice that perhaps consistently people are not wanting to connect with you across difference or people are offended, you could choose to say, well, people are just being politically correct, and I'm just telling it like it is. Is your goal to be right or to be in right relationship? If you want to be in right relationship and authentically connected with people, go back and dig and ask yourself, "Why am I getting these results? Why do people perceive me in this particular way? Why is it that people shut down when I come into the room or when this particular topic comes up and I'm present?"

It's an opportunity for you to be curious. So rather than being defensive, you can ask yourself those questions. And then even if you think that you've come to the conclusion, one of the critical dig questions that I like people to ask is, "What if I'm wrong?" So you may have this interpretation of this interaction. But what if you're wrong, then what would you do? So those are some of the questions that I would encourage people to ask themselves, as they're bridging and knowing when to go back to dig.

Brett: And for this process, both in terms of dig and bridge, I'm curious what your observations have been in terms of how people from power-dominant groups — let's say, mainly white in North America — versus folks in marginalized groups, and how they approach it, and what the respective challenges are for them.

Tina: And Brett, thank you for using those terms. And so for listeners, I don't use the word majority and minority. Instead, I use the words historically power dominant and historically marginalized, respectively. And the conversation we're having about identity- it's based on power. In the world, there are status hierarchies,

there are some people who have more access to and control over resources. That's how we define power. And there are people who have less access to and control over resources. That's who we refer to as historically marginalized people.

I mentioned before that Beth is a white atheist woman, I'm a Black Christian woman. Well, at least in the United States, and perhaps in North America, Christian is considered the power-dominant religion. So if Beth and I are having a conversation about religion, I listen much more than I talk. Why? Because if you are coming from the power-dominant culture, it's normative. The norms, the policies, the experiences — those are the things that are often used to determine what is the norm. And if you don't believe me, in the United States, for example, when we look at the academic calendar, the holidays that are off their Christian holidays, we don't have Diwali off. So what does that mean? That means I have to listen to the voices of people who are from historically marginalized groups in order to learn, because we're swimming in the norms that I might not even see.

In parallel, when we talk about things like racio-ethnicity or gender, when you are in a group, where your gender has historically had more power, then the call is for you to listen more than you talk, is to actually prioritize the voices that have historically been marginalized. And the hope is that we all learn from each other. But primarily, I am saying, I want people from historically power-dominant groups to listen. And you might educate yourself independently, because the goal is not for historically marginalized people to have to educate, I want to be sure of that there are some things you can do on your own. But it's to prioritize those voices, so that we can move towards equity as opposed to consistently advantaged people from historically power dominant groups.

Brett: That's great. And when people have dug deep enough, and are at a position to form a bridge, can you talk about why authenticity is important to the shared sisterhood process?

Tina: Authenticity is a critical ingredient in Shared Sisterhood. The way that I define authenticity is when your internal experiences and your external expressions are aligned. And both of those are aligned with your deeply held values. Shared sisterhood relies on authenticity. So when Beth and I were connecting, if she has a question about religion or how it may have harmed a particular community, she needs to be able to come to me and ask that question from an authentic place and know that even if I don't agree with her, I'm going to respond in that way.

And if we do have conflict, we will still extend grace to each other — grace is unearned favor. So I could say something that is highly offensive to Beth. She could jack me up, right? She could dismiss me, she could do whatever is necessary for her to feel better. Or she could extend her hand and say, "I believe we both value equity, so how can we move forward." So authenticity is critical. Because this is not about playing to some ideology about who we think or want other people to be. That's why authenticity is so important, because it actually enables us to come together in a way that is distinct from when we're being superficial. And it also is very good for your well being to just be understood a key human need is to be known. And when you can develop authentic connections and start sisterhood, people know you, and they love you anyway.

Brett: One of the points that you make in the book about bridging that really resonated with me was the importance of risk taking. And that it's not until somebody really puts themselves out there in support of a marginalized group or a person, and really has taken a risk that progress can happen. Can you talk to us about what risk taking looks like in practice?

Tina: One of the examples I'd like to give as many of us have probably been in a meeting, where we observe a slight — a man may take credit for a woman's idea, for example. And then after the meeting, people may go up to that woman and say, "I'm so sorry that that happened to you in a meeting, oh, my goodness." Or something racist may be said, and they'll email me and say, "Oh, my gosh, that was so racist."

Well, look, I don't need you to tell me that practically. I need you, in the meeting, to take the risk to say, "You know what? That was offensive to me because as a human being, I don't think it's appropriate that we judge people in that way." That doesn't mean that you fire the person who made the comment, doesn't mean you get rid of them. But it does mean that you take the risk of broaching the topic in public. And what I like to say is that if there's a public affront, there needs to be a public redress, don't send me a private email. Because what you're doing is avoiding risk.

Now, some people might say, "Well, I didn't want to embarrass you." I've already been slighted, believe me, I feel very much alone. So it feels very good when someone else takes a risk and uses some of their social or political capital on behalf of a member of a historically marginalized group. And then the group can learn and get better. So risk taking is critical. Because if you're not willing to use your social or political capital, what are you really working towards? It's sort of, well, I believe in equity, as long as it doesn't cost me anything. And it's going to cost you something.

Brett: It does seem that risk taking is necessary to move beyond being performative or just symbolic. I want to talk about systemic change. And one of the great things about the book is that it's a introduction for people to be change agents themselves, and how they live and work every day, but also how those actions can lead to greater change within an organization. And perhaps even beyond that. You talk a little bit about the book about how recent EDI strategies that focus on training individuals can sometimes be at the expense of systemic solutions. Can you share with us how you see shared sisterhood addressing those shortcomings?

Tina: One of the critical distinctions with Shared Sisterhood and other initiatives that we've seen is that it looks at levels of analysis. So we look at the individual level, the interpersonal level, and then the systemic level. So quite a few trainings — I mean, God bless these trainings, they've helped us have some advances — they focus on the individual level. "This is my implicit bias. This is the these are some of the biases that I may have as a person."

The important thing, though, is then to connect that to how does that interact with how you talk to other people, how you behave towards other people. And then how do those biases, especially as leaders, inform the systems that we have in place. The idea of dig is great. But that's not the destination. The idea of bridge is great. But that's not the destination, the destination is, once you've done dig and bridge, we can now link arms. And together, we can look at our organization and say, "Hmm, we noticed that our recruiting or our onboarding, or socialization or pay, or evaluation systems tend to be biased."

Now I know some people are gonna say, "Well, you can't just focus on the outcomes, you have to also look at the inputs." But if you systematically are finding that there are disparate outcomes by groups, either you think that's because of individual issues, or you think that there could also be something systemic that's happening.

So either you think women weren't being paid less than men, or else perhaps there's some inequity in the system. And I think each of us has to contend with that. So with Shared Sisterhood, we do look at the systemic level, we want to make sure we're creating action plans, we're coming up with metrics, we're identifying who is responsible for correcting those systems, that is very different than a lot of the initiatives that we've seen where it's sort of loosey goosey, we just want to increase the proportion of X per cent, or this kind of person. The goal is to actually dismantle inequity at a systemic level.

Brett: A lot of institutions have a lot of red tape or historical biases. And so people can hit roadblocks. What's your advice for folks in terms of how to spot those roadblocks and how to bypass them so they can actually make that change?

Tina: In the book, we talk about having a Shared Sisterhood safe culture. If employees raise an issue and says, "We think that there's some inequities there," and if your response is to say, "You cannot publicly post about that," or "You can't talk about that," or "Let's stop," that's probably a indication of a roadblock, where you may have espoused values, you may say that you value diversity, equity and inclusion, but your inactive values differ, because not only are people raising the issues of inequity, but you are tamping down even the discussion of the inequity. That is a critical signal.

And so many times organizations are concerned about things like public relations. And I get it, especially if you're publicly traded. This is one reason why when I go into an organization and I do Shared Sisterhood, I start from the top down and the bottom up. So I'm working with the C-suite team, to help them dig into their notions about what is equitable, what is not equitable, so that when they then confront these issues that I'm mentioning now of employees raising inequities, and then I'm trying to suppress it, they have a personal understanding of how and why they might be responding in the way that they are. Because that's one way to help redress or eliminate that roadblock. And so there are several roadblocks that we talked about in the book, you have to read the book to hear the rest of them.

Brett: Fair enough. For folks who do link arms and have success in creating some change within their organization, what's your advice so that it's not a one and done? And how do they maintain that momentum so that they're actually able to create long lasting change?

Tina: This is a great question. I mean, I think, at an individual level, consistently being curious, as critical. One of the things that I love to do though, is we can use collaboration, competitive collaboration- I know that's not necessarily a thing. But what I mean by that is, let's communicate throughout the organization that this division has had a success with shared sisterhood, and this is how they did it. Because what that does is it generates an interest perhaps in doing the same thing in different divisions. And so I think one of the ways to ensure that you have a continued sustained change is to communicate the things that have gone well, and the things that haven't gone as well, so that you can learn and help each other develop.

The other thing is, I think, to constantly to develop mechanisms that help you understand what is actually going on in the organization. Because organizations are organisms. They're living, breathing things with human beings in them. There's always going to be opportunities for improvement and growth.

I think one of the ways to sustain the desired growth is to make sure that you have your finger on the pulse of what's going on. Because if you understand our organization is going to improve not just from a business standpoint, but our employees will be more engaged, they'll have better well being, that influences a host of issues and expenses. People may want to railroad this into being about diversity, inclusion and equity. This is about leadership and culture through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion. And if you are able to successfully implement some of the things that we talked about, you'll be improving your organization for everyone.

Brett: You've been working on Shared Sisterhood for more than a decade. The past few years, through the pandemic have really put a lot of issues including racial inequities into stark relief, the murder of George Floyd and other tragedies have really caused a lot of people to focus on what they can do to make a difference. But society is a pendulum, and it can swing in both directions. I would love to hear your thoughts about where we are today, and what are the lessons that we need to keep in mind from the past few years?

Tina: I use that expression, often history reflects a pendulum where you have what some people will consider forward progress towards justice, and then there's always a backlash. And if you just think about the civil rights movement, or go back to the Civil War in the United States, then there's a period of reconstruction, then there's a rise of the Klan. So one of the things that I will say right now, where do I think we are today, it happens to be election day in the United States midterm elections. And I have seen some political ads that are really troubling. And what they say, is there a couple of ads that talk about when did it become okay to discriminate against X power-dominant group.

Now, I would not say that the pursuit of equity is discriminatory. But unfortunately, when the system has been structured in such a way — where you have been privileged, so you've historically had 99 per cent of the positions, now you have 95 per cent — equity, can feel inequitable when historically you've had all of the marbles, if that makes sense.

I think we are in a period of deep grievance and loss and fear from members of historically power-dominant groups. And I think we're seeing legislation and judicial outcomes that are reflecting that.

I like to listen to supreme court hearings. And there were some cases affirmative action, listen to some of those oral arguments, and you will hear the fear and the grievance. They're totally illogical arguments that are being made. And they feel as though they're being made to uphold the extant power structure. And that is concerning. It is concerning, but I think there are so many of us who are interested in a truly equitable world that we will persist, we'll continue. I have no idea what's going to happen. And then today and the elections the next year or the next 10 years, but my hope is that we at least continue to engage in the work to, to ask these kinds of questions to have these kinds of conversations. And for those of you who doubt everything that I say: What if I'm right, what if you're wrong? What if there are things that all of us can benefit from if we do something like shared sisterhood? What would the world look like if we proceed that?

Brett: That's certainly the question. I love the word persist because that's definitely a feeling that I get from the book and something that is so important for all of us to do. You deal with these questions every day? You live

in this environment where things are changing, and some of these conversations are difficult. How do you persist?

Tina: I persist by looking into the eyes of my children, and knowing that I want to help create a world that they don't contend with some of the issues that me and others have, have experienced. I also persist because of people like you, Brett. So you're a sister, you're a white man who is a sister, there are so many people out there who want to do better who are interested in linking arms. That keeps me optimistic. Was it Dr. King who said, "The arc of history bends towards justice"? That is true. And so rather than waiting for other people to do it, Beth, and I said, we need to write something so that we can actually influence the form of that arc.

Brett: Well, you're making a great impact and you are influencing things. I will accept the comment that that I'm a sister trying my best to take my privilege and do something good with it. Tina, many congrats to you and Beth on a terrific book. We're very excited and proud to have you here at Rotman today. Where can people find out more about you if they want to get in touch or have questions?

Tina: I have a website. DrTinaOpie.com- I guess WWW...do you still have to say that nowadays? Type in DrTinaOpie.com and see what comes up. But you can find more information about me on the website. I actually have a [TEDx](#) talk on Shared Sisterhood if you're interested in checking that out. And then my co author, Dr. Beth Livingston, she's at BethaLivingston.com.

Brett: Wonderful, thank you. This has been Rotman Visiting Experts backstage discussions with world class thinkers and researchers from our acclaimed speaker series. To find out about upcoming speakers and events visiting us here at Canada's leading business school, please visit rotman.utoronto.ca/events.

This episode was produced by Megan Haynes, recorded by Dan Mazzotta and edited by Damian Kearns.

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Sonia: Thanks to the team at Rotman's Visiting Experts podcast for this episode. Busted is written and produced by Carmina Ravanera and me, Sonia Kang, and edited by Ian Gormely.

Carmina: If you liked this episode, please rate, subscribe and share. The Institute for Gender and the Economy also produces more great podcasts, which you can find at gendereconomy.org or by searching "Institute for Gender and the Economy" wherever you find your podcasts. Thanks for listening!