PODCAST 3 – Mental Health

Nishtha: Hello listener. Welcome to "The Pigment Paradox," the podcast where we explore the intersection of corporate colorism and gender in India. Today, we're diving into a topic that's often overlooked but is critically important: mental health and colorism in India.

Nishtha: Let's kick things off with a deep dive into the bias reinforcement cycle. Imagine this: subtle comments or actions, though seemingly harmless, chip away the confidence of dark-skinned women, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. It's a relentless cycle that wreaks havoc on their professional and personal lives. According to a study by Antoinette Landor and McNeil Smith in 2019, people who experience colorism are more likely to develop hypertension, psychological distress, and are prone to more health-related issues.

Nishtha: But wait, it gets even trickier in the workplace. Dark-skinned women, fearing backlash or isolation, often opt to stay silent rather than confront colorism head-on. This culture of silence not only hamper their career growth but also transform their internal representations resulting in stress-related triggers that can be manifested in their cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical responses. Day in and day out, we're reminded—sometimes subtly, sometimes not—that we don't quite fit into the mold of a "typical" corporate employee. The message is clear: we don't belong in spaces dominated by whiteness and maleness. Let's hear from Jasmine Bagga, a counselling psychologist currently practicing in India. She has her own online counselling practice and is also working with a government hospital on a community mental health project for children and adolescents. She has also written a research paper on colorism effects in young adults.

Jasmine: Hi Nishtha. So, I'm Jasmine and I'm a counseling psychologist who's currently practicing in India. I've completed my master's and my undergraduate in applied psychology from India itself and currently I have my own private practice which is online and I'm also working with the government hospital on a community mental health project for children and adolescents and we're raising awareness about their mental health and if some children need any additional help then we are providing them counseling and other treatments. So, I've also written 2 research papers and one of them is on the topic that we're going to discuss today - The skin color preference in males and females in India.

Jasmine: Uh, I think I was personally motivated to go ahead with this topic as well because I felt like uh, even though people deny it, but there's this subtle or sometimes even direct reference to skin color as a discriminating factor, and especially in the Indian context and a lot of times people don't realize that it is not just about being fair and being not fair, so to say. But it's also about the shades of brown. Like I've also mentioned in the in my paper that it isn't like you're extremely fair so, you're pretty or you're extremely dark and that's it. There, there are so many shades of brown and there's so many comparison levels that yeah, it's much more complex than that.

Jasmine: So, I would like to talk about one of this kid that I was talking to last week in a school setup and it was a government school setup. So even though this kid is not currently in the formal professional system, but while talking to her, she brought up how her classmates were bullying her because of her skin color. And she was she had a comparatively darker skin tone. Ohh and because of that, she'd always felt like she was inferior in some way. And while talking

to her, she was excellent in her studies. There, there were no symptoms of any other mental health issues, pathologies, but because of her skin color, she said that she was not able to focus on her studies.

Jasmine: Her self-esteem had significantly decreased, and her peers used to continuously say her mean words because of her skin color and the problem in the system is that those people who were mocking her were not, like extremely fair or white people who were doing that. They were just a little bit fairer to her. So, and she was taking it so much on her mental health that even during counseling while I was counseling, and there was another social worker with me who was of a similar tone to her skin color. And I think she was more comfortable talking to the social worker than me because of the similarity in their skin tones. And then we did some exercises with her, but when she heard that the social worker was married and she was professionally doing good, then I could see that her eyes were lit up because she could see that - OK, I can also do all of that if you know this person can do that. So yeah, that's the case that recently happened with me, which I wanted to share.

Jasmine: Even in our research study, we had asked a question to people we've shown them images of three people and three Indian women, and we had asked them who would you choose for the role of a receptionist. And a lot of people, specifically people who were of the fairer or lighter skin tone, they've chosen, a women who had a lighter skin tone and mostly for jobs which were related to, you know, which were receptionist jobs or desk jobs wherein you would have to talk to people so and this was in our research study, which you know which over 100 people filled. So the point that I'm trying to say is that somewhere in our mind, even though it's an implicit bias somewhere in our mind, when we want to, when we know that someone is gonna represent our company or someone is gonna, even as employers, you know employers have this bias that you know, if they're hiring a receptionist or if they're hiring people who are going to be the face of their company, then they need someone who's, so to say, fair, because the definition of Fair translates to pretty, which I don't know from where that has come. Yeah.

Jasmine: I think I wouldn't deny at all that men do not face colorism issues. And I think men and women both are facing such issues. But why I would like to highlight that women are facing this issue more is because at the same time, if we talk about the professional domain, I feel a lot of jobs that women currently are doing I would say are office-based jobs, the jobs wherein you know they have to be presentable and the jobs that they're doing would also require them to look pretty. So, I feel that because of this issue also a lot of times opportunities are denied to women who are not fair skinned.

Jasmine: It would be unfair of me to say that, OK, go to a therapist and everything would heal because it's such a such a systemic thing and they're facing it every day in their lives. So it's an ongoing journey because you'll go to therapy, you might go for some a few sessions, but then the discrimination might not end, you know, till there is a systemic change till there's awareness about and that is something that you know we can't change individually. But the thing that we can do as individual persons is definitely to practice affirmations, and this is something which has helped me personally. Just looking in the mirror and telling you know ourselves it OK, I'm pretty and you know, it doesn't matter what others are thinking and to actually feel that because most of the times the victims of colorism themselves, you know, internalize it. This thing that OK,

the only pretty thing in the world is, you know, people who are fair. So that needs to change and seeking professional help is definitely an option.

Jasmine: You know, if it, if it is really taking a toll, then seeking professional help definitely helps. I think alongside it is also important to surround ourselves with people who are understanding to the cause because a lot of times we have friends who might be having a lighter skin tone and they are, you know, there are friends and we expect them to understand, but they would also participate in colorist jokes at times. And, you know, bullying is so normalized in India. And so I just feel like we also need to set that boundary now, you know, as adults, we need to set that boundary in our workplaces that, you know. Ohh if our friends are making jokes and just you know saying oh, it's just a joke. You know, I think we need to set that boundary with them also that you know this is something this is a sensitive topic and I expect you know as allies or your friend should be supportive of it and they should acknowledge their privilege that they have not you know, they have not been discriminated against based on their skin color and the way that you know your friends and as a community we can help is that we need to acknowledge our privilege that we have.

Jasmine: You know, maybe I have faced less discrimination from a person who was offered darker skin tone than me, so I need to acknowledge that. Even as a therapist, and even as a person. And at the same time, I feel we people who are who face such issues should try to externalize it, because this whole concept is this whole concept has, I don't know, stem from colonization or what. But it's a very global concept and the only way we can individually beat it at, you know, is by training our brain that, you know, this is not something which is real. This is just something made by some humans who believe that being fair was pretty and it's a result of colorism.

Nishtha: So, what's the key takeaway here? Colorism biases aren't just harmless remarks—they're silent killers of confidence and self-esteem in dark-skinned women, affecting every aspect of their lives. Imposter syndrome, which is often seen as gender-neutral, intensifies with experiences of colorism among women.

Nishtha: In the corporate world, dark skinned women face a unique struggle—one that cuts deep and weighs heavy on our hearts. It's not because we lack talent or ambition, but because the color of our skin and our gender intersect to place us on shaky ground. And it's no wonder that so many of the women are considering walking away.

Nishtha: Now, do you think that the psychological impact of colorism on self-efficacy which is defined as the belief that one can master situations and control events may have gendered outcome? Of course, the answer is a yes. Women feel marginalized, overlooked, and disheartened—a sentiment that resonates deeply with our own experiences.

Nishtha: So, to all the women of color out there grappling with these emotions, know this: your feelings are valid, your experiences matter, and you are not alone. By sharing our stories and supporting one another, we can break down barriers and pave the way for a more empowering future in the corporate world and beyond.

Nishtha: Thanks for joining me today. Until next time, keep breaking boundaries and shattering stereotypes.