



EMPOWER PEOPLE: GRINNELL PRIZE WINNER SHAFIQ KHAN TRANSCRIPT

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Ben Binversie:

It is easy to build a nation, it is far more difficult to shape a society. And that is what Shafiq Khan is doing. (singing) This is All Things Grinnell, I'm your host, Ben Binversie. I have a very special show in store for you. We're talking with Shafiq Khan, the winner of the 2019 Grinnell College Innovator for Social Justice Prize about his work fighting bride trafficking in India through his organization,

EMPOWER PEOPLE. I don't like to pick favorites but this is hands down my favorite conversation I've done for the podcast, so forgive me for the length of this episode. I, and so many other, have gained so much from interacting with Shafiq this week. I wanted to share as much as I could with all of you.

Ben Binversie:

That's coming up next after I remind you that the information and opinions expressed in this podcast are solely those of the individuals involved and do not represent the views of Grinnell College. The Grinnell College Innovator for Social Justice Prize began in 2011 to extend the college's educational mission beyond the campus and alumni community to individuals anywhere who believe innovative social justice programs create a better world. The prize entails \$100,000 split evenly between the winner and their organization. This year's winner is Shafiq Khan and his organization, EMPOWER PEOPLE. I sat down to talk with Shafiq earlier this week about his work. I talked to him for four hours that day, and many times since and my mind is still reeling from our discussion.

Ben Binversie:

To be totally open and honest with you, I'm still trying to wrap my brain around him and how he looks at the world. Let me pull back the podcast curtain for a minute, break the fourth wall of the podcast sphere. Listener, I'm talking to you. When I approached this interview, I did research as I do for all my interviews. But I went into this conversation without a real understanding of Shafiq and his work. I didn't know much about the problem of bride trafficking in India, and you might not either. Even if you know a different type of trafficking in a different location. I think it's important to descend into the particulars here and understand Shafiq's work in its context. Not that it isn't replicable or applicable to change making elsewhere, but to understand him, I think we need to free ourselves from our preconceived notions about what trafficking might look like in India.

Ben Binversie:

I imagine this interview will leave you with more questions than when you began. I know it did for me and I certainly had a lot of questions to begin with. Normally, I expect people to respond to questions within a certain range of possibilities, but Shafiq thwarted my desires to control the conversation. He goes off on tangents he, whirls and twirls and tells stories, and he readily admits that he's not a philosopher. He does not subscribe to a particular ideology, his thoughts are constantly evolving based on what he learns from his work and talking to people. His understanding of the problem is evolving as well as is the organization's approach to solving the problem of bride trafficking. And that is why the Grinnell Prize is so perfectly suited for him.

Ben Binversie:

Unlike other anti-trafficking organizations, EMPOWER PEOPLE is focused not just on the rescuing of trafficked women and girls, but on bringing them back into mainstream society and empowering them. They do this by advocating for land ownership by survivors, survivor representation in

government and community education through conversation. Shafiq is interested in addressing the root causes of bride trafficking, not just the symptoms. Even the word rescue to Shafiq is not adequate because it reeks of the patriarchal system that creates the problem in the first place. EMPOWER PEOPLE is not a protectionist organization, its goal is liberation. First and foremost, of the survivors of bride trafficking, but of everyone, of men, of the traffickers themselves. Even the word empowerment to Shafiq is not sufficient to describe their work.

Ben Binversie:

But we're working within the confines of the English language, and Shafiq himself is not a native English speaker, but he manages to get his ideas across quite adeptly regardless. Shafiq Khan is now singularly focused on bride trafficking, but his path to creating EMPOWER PEOPLE was long. He started working as a youth working in various organizations and political groups, studying with spiritual gurus, but he never felt like they accomplished what he wanted. He was trying to connect his idea with everyone.

Shafiq Khan:

And then I realized like this is not working, I should do something else. This is not my way to change things. Because most of the time I saw like they are making everything political, and I wanted to do something which can give some immediate remedy or immediate relief to the people. I'm still impressed with the idea, but the way we are doing things are not enough for that particular area. I decided to work for the people and then we started a group called Career Development Corner, that was for adolescents and college-going students who can serve each other and help each other. I was doing all this and suddenly things got changed and everything was become difficult for us because government was cracking down Marxist Movement. My family was cracking down me like they wanted me to do something else like continuous study and all.

Shafiq Khan:

I came to Delhi and I joined Hindu a spiritual guru, Swami Agnivesh. He was doing a brilliant job and he's a pioneer in India for bonded labor liberation. I joined his organization and worked there for six months. But I was not satisfied with that, no, in the way organization was working, so I was greedy kind of person since my childhood. I wanted to do things by my idea and I was-

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, your own way.

Shafiq Khan:

... trying to connect my idea with everyone but that was not connecting. I decided to make it by my own. Swami Agnivesh at that time was doing a brilliant thing like he was marching from Tankara of Gujarat to Amritsar against female feticide. I was part of this march, I was working as a back office volunteer. I learned a lot and I had opportunity to read some small literature written by Kamla

Bhasin, she is a pioneer in feminist movement in India. Then I realized something is connecting me with this idea, because I was trying to find some basic unit of discrimination, why discrimination happens and why such a great disparity between people is existing in the society. I thought like, “Okay, so this is gender thing.” I had started a march and that was 300 kilometer march on foot and we were young, yeah, literally young.

Shafiq Khan:

Even I had not first shaved at that time, so I was really young. We had started a march in Haryana, and when we went to the village, we learned like we know nothing about the society. Everyone was asking questions to us, and we had no answer about anything. My group encountered an amazing thing during the march. We saw like every time the village is the group who used to ask us question and we are trying to connect with them saying like, “We should not practice this female feticide thing and gender inequality is bad.” They used to ask us different question, and we had no answer about that. Then we realize some people from the community itself are responding on behalf of us. Someone asked some question and their village members is responding that question, they are giving the answer and we are nowhere in this conversation.

Shafiq Khan:

We were just starting this thing, and so we learned that both thing, the question and answer, is at same place. All we need to do is connect them both. This was the idea, and while in the march, a girl met me there and she said like, “You look like from my area and you are working for their girls, why you are not working for your girls? Your girls are being sold.” That was the first time I hear that human being is being sold in this century. When we learn this it was shocking for me, and I asked my friends like, “What should we do? This girl was sold and she is living here with people but in a pathetic situation.” My friend suggested that we cannot do anything in this case, we are not powerful, we are just young children so we cannot do this. So leave this.

Shafiq Khan:

After finishing the March, after two or three months, I was sleeping, and suddenly I recalled that woman and thought like, “I should meet her again.” I went there and when I asked the person that where is that girl, he said like, “I’ve sold her to someone else.” That was blunt answer I have ever encountered. He said, “I have sold her.” I ask, “Where?” He said like that particular village. I went to that particular village. I started that searching that particular girl and I find many other girls but not her. I thought it is alarming situation, so I came back to Delhi and went to different NGOs, different government offices and different areas to share what I have encountered. I had no knowledge about NGOs and other things like I thought this is big institution and this must be made by some big people and not common people like me.

Shafiq Khan:

Then I called Kamla Bhasin and I said I wanted to meet, I have this, this, this things. Even I was thinking like being a man, I cannot do anything for women. How can I do this? Kamla Bhasin said,

“You should do this.” I said, “No, I am man.” She said, “Yes, this is why you can do this. Being man, you can do this so you should do.” Then she asked me if I can prepare a plan on how to give them relief. Then I worked on a plan and shared with her. She said, “Okay, you have made this plan so you should execute it.” This was encouragement and she convinced me to make it. Then I started working on it, on bride trafficking and I’m almost lost in this cause.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, you’ve become really involved in it.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, I became part of the whole thing and this became my only mission. For now, bride trafficking is a cause which makes me, as Shafiq, a good human. I must say like good human. I learned a lot from the survivors of bride trafficking, I learned a lot of from those victims and their families and I can understand separation, pain of separation. This makes me a human being. Prior to this cause, I was just an aimless youth who was finding some way to live, but now I have a mission.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, you were looking for a cause to drive you and you finally found it. Can you describe how the typical process of bride trafficking works in Northern India? Who are the people involved and how does it happen?

Shafiq Khan:

Every time when we talk about trafficking, we must look onto both point, source to destination, because trafficking is something which connects two places for a single case. When I see bride trafficking in North India, I must say that this is not only about sex ratio issue—that people are buying girls because they have less girl in their villages or their community. But it directly belongs to land and cheap agricultural labor. Because most of the time you will find people are buying girls and forcing them to work in paddy field. Those girls are doing all those things. We call it bride trafficking because most of the time they use institution of marriage for justifying this traffic-

Ben Binversie:

As a conduit.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah. These girls are being sold and resold. If someone is buying a girl for marriage, then the girl would have a basic right of being family member in the family and she must have better treatment. But people used to call them “borrow.” Borrow is a word for stolen. They used to call them “malky.” “Malky” literally mean “purchased.” If you are buying a girl for marriage, you will never call them with these abusive words, these monetary words. You are calling them stolen, you are calling them purchase, why? Because they are not of your community, they are not going to inherit anything

from your ancestry. Their children are not going to become your descendant. This is a really common practice to buy and sell and purchase those girls. Every single girl, bride trafficking girl, used to sell four to ten times.

Shafiq Khan:

If you are buying a wife, if you are paying reverse dowry, then you are not going to sell them again. But you are selling, that means that is not wife, she has become commodity kind of thing. This is happening in destination, most of the people who have less opportunity to, I mean, they are not working or if they have some disability, physical disability or mental disability, their family member used to give them a woman. The woman will earn and cook for that particular person and his life will be survived. The day the man will be died, this woman will be sold again. This is going in destination, and the source area, there is poverty, there is different kind of problem and some time because every time if something have some kind of demand, people used to create products. These girls have been demand in Northern India.

Shafiq Khan:

In Eastern India or Southern India, trafficking networks is spreading their wings and they are loading girls into trafficking by different means. Sometime they got contact them as lovers and they ask and lure those girls in to love affairs and play with them. Some time they used to promise them good job. If you will see the data, you will see that abduction or different kind of trafficking for the purpose of sex trafficking is decreasing in India. For the purpose of marriage and different other trafficking is increasing regularly. This is not only about sex ratio, it is also about how society have given them some kind of sanction, like validity, to import the girl. Most of the time people used to say like people are buying these girls for this reason. Have you ever hear that someone is talking that particular man rape someone because he had no sex partner?

Shafiq Khan:

No, you will never find reason in the case of rape, but you will always find reason when it comes to poor people who are being sold and resold again. This is typical criminal thing, and it is mentioned in a different kind of folklore, different kind of oral history, and other things. We need to understand those things through those particular historical tracks. Northern India is importing girls since ages—and it has nothing to do with sex ratio. Sex ratio is just an-

Ben Binversie:

Excuse.

Shafiq Khan:

... excuse for this crime.

Ben Binversie:

Can you talk about the system of arranged marriages and dowries? Which the dowry system is officially outlawed by the government, as I understand, but it's still widely practiced? How do you tell the difference sometimes between an arranged marriage and the cases where you work with where the brides are being trafficked?

Shafiq Khan:

Well, yes, there is connection, of course, there is connection because most of the time when you belongs to that type of society, where arranged marriage is necessary, and if you are self-arranged or love marriage is not possible. Then it became a prestige of family, it became an issue of family that their boy is not getting married, their girls are not getting married. It becomes an issue of whole family, and they used to make pressure on the people. Marriage became necessary for those young men and women. Men who have privileged to buy girls used to buy girls, but women are still not buying men. So that women will start buying brides for marriage, we can say like, "Okay, this is happening because of this type of culture probably."

Shafiq Khan:

This is not about dowry because if we will talk about Haryana, dowry is a still huge issue and dowry is still being in practice. Dowry is outlawed but it is existing and very well existing in the society, even law enforcement agencies people belongings to law enforcement agencies and judiciary are giving dowries. This is cultural issue. If people have less girls, then there should not be dowry and there should not be caste-aesthetic marriages, like a man cannot marry a dalit girl. If a girl is not available in the society, people should start marrying inter-caste marriages. People should just start breaking the caste line, but that that is not happening at the society level.

Ben Binversie:

At the core of the issue then what, as your organization seeks to educate and prevent this issue from happening in the first place, what are the views of women that you're trying to change and what are the ideas that people have or the behaviors that they exhibit that you're trying to change?

Shafiq Khan:

Every time when we see things, we are seeing that most of the people who are being trafficked are landless people, and those who have no access over natural resources and those who have now living in a forest area, and government is institutionalizing the forest. And kicking out those people from the forest, so that they became shelterless and there is no proper rehabilitation of those people. They become easy prey for the trafficking, and they seek some option to be rehabilitated in different way. Sometimes they try to migrate and it became trafficking. We are trying to and advocating to have access over natural resources. The forest, we just want government to maintain ecological system, ecology of the forest. The forest should be wild and it should not be institutionalized. Forest should be wild now, somethings should be wild.

Shafiq Khan:

We are trying to do that, and we are trying and advocating to land rights of women. If women will have land rights in their particular community, they would never been trafficked for useless reasons. These are core issues, and apart from these things, we are trying to connect those community and those children, young children with these schools. We are campaigning on a regular basis that girls should have secondary education, and they are getting it and they are connecting with it.

Ben Binversie:

The problem of land rights is it seems very far removed from the actual problem that you're working to solve that is bride trafficking. That's interesting and something that I think unless you're there and understand the problem, it would be hard for someone to think that that is the cause of the problem. So it's interesting. What are the difficulties that you face in trying to find the victims and working in this area where statistics are hard to come by? Like there's not necessarily reliable information on how big this problem is, you obviously have some numbers because of the work that you do. But step one in your organization's work is finding these women and working towards rescue, that's part of it. How do you approach that part of your work?

Shafiq Khan:

The organization which works with the community in destination where people are buying girls. We have informers in mainstream society, we have a helpline and people used to call us informing that his neighbors or her neighbors have purchased a girl. Second source is parents of the traffic victim who used to say like their children have been trafficked or they are missing. Some time our commune, our group, our survivors' group used to inform us that their village or their neighboring area have a new girl who have come from some other area. We also conduct different kind of survey in those areas to identify if there is some new girl. This is called investigation, so we do investigation that is first source of information. Second is parents of missing. Third is the common people who used to have sympathy and solidarity with victims, they used to inform us, and our survivor leaders. We have four type of information sources for finding these girls.

Ben Binversie:

Then once you find them, where do you do from there?

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, so this is interesting, like most of the time when we find someone, some new case, some new girl, we first conduct basic investigation about that. We first track things like how she was trafficked and where she belongs to and everything. Then we ask her consent for everything we are going to do. If girl is minor, then we ensure rescue operation at any cost. There is no need to ask consent because even legally you cannot ask consent if someone is minor. We used to conduct rescue operation immediately. But if a girl is not minor, then we used to ask their consent. If they are willing to go back to their home and if they want to be rescued and ready to face these things, the time they say yes and go ahead, then we start preparation for rescue.

Shafiq Khan:

But the time they get to refuse and say, “No, I cannot go back because of some personal issues,” then we say like, “You should join our group and you should start visiting our group.” We used to make force on the people and the person who have purchased her. The social pressure we try to make on them that this woman or this girl will attend our meeting every week at our of office area or some local commune group. They used to do that and we try to give them all kind of support there, and some time they got ready to go back to their home. We ensure that each and every woman or girl should visit their home at least once. That she will have idea about the society because like most of the time if someone is rescued, even if not rescued, if she is going back to their home, there is a lot of stigma waiting for her.

Shafiq Khan:

She cannot leave there because of her stigma and all. We used to ask consent and we used to support them continuously and convince them to have all right here where she was purchased. At least, we have just started this thing, we have less than 500 such women who have got land rights or land from their husband, and this is not a legal right. They cannot own land from husband, they cannot get share from husband legally. But we have 400 something, I forgot the exact number. These women have claimed their rights of land and they all have land in their name. This is what we have done, so we are not thinking just to enforce the law, we are thinking beyond the law. Because as individual, if she has come here from her native place, she should have a fixed right here. Land right is necessary for identity for any women, and we are making this a part of their dignity. Women who have land right is established woman for me.

Ben Binversie:

It's so much more than just rescuing the women and-

Shafiq Khan:

Rescuing is not solution of the problem, the solution is liberation and liberation is not coming without having right to spending. Every woman, what is the right? Right is not earning money, the woman who was trafficked is already earning with different mean. Being agricultural worker, she's earning, being sex worker, she's earning, but all money is going to their owner. That is the problem, the money is going to the owner, this is the problem. Earning is not the problem, so we need to make it, fix it and give them liberation to expend the money so she can earn and-

Ben Binversie:

Spend it on-

Shafiq Khan:

... spend it on their own budget and their own will. Once she will have land rights that will be established identity and she can earn and spend money with her free will—this is liberation. This is

what we do, this is what we are doing, and this is what our organization aspire for.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, that's the ultimate goal, and I can see where your experience as a child working with the Marxist group that you did informs the understanding of land rights and being able to own the products of your labor, you've talked to, I imagine thousands of these women who've been involved in this and, in some cases, they're still going through it. What are their experiences like and what have you learned from talking to them?

Shafiq Khan:

Working with women is amazing, and working with trafficking survivors is really amazing. Because most of the time you learn a lot from them. They have suffered a lot of problem and they can analyze anyone with first impression. They have ability to do this, and every time as a person, I think, like most of the women who have been trafficked or become fall into trafficking is a failed entrepreneur. They all have brilliant ideas, but being entrepreneur they were failed, somehow they were failed because of the response mechanism of the society. I learned from them how to challenge authority, I learn from them how to think differently, and I learned from them how to make things, create things, create ideas. Everything we are doing is coming from survivors itself. Let me give you an example.

Ben Binversie:

Okay.

Shafiq Khan:

In 2002, we were offered by an organization, a big funding organization for donation and funds, they wanted us to establish a shelter home for them. Organized, institutionalized shelter home, and we called a meeting of survivor leaders and we were sharing the whole idea like how we are going to establish the shelter and how this will work. A girl stood up and asked me if we are going to give them right to have sex in that particular shelter home? I was shocked, and I said, this is not possible because if I will allow this, I will be in jail. This is not legal. She said, "How do you know that girl don't want sex? Who are you to decide this?" This is what a trafficking survivor asked me. They are more feminist than anyone else.

Shafiq Khan:

Most of the time when someone asked me, "Who is your ideal?" I say, "Yes, they are survival leaders, they are ideals," because they have raw experience, raw knowledge, and better knowledge than anyone else because they have survived a lot of operation. They have changed our ideas, they have challenged our ideas, and they teach us a lot with the simple words. So we not need to choose bulky words, we not need to choose technical words, and we not need to go with different ideologies and different philosophies. We just need to understand what they-

Ben Binversie:

What they want-

Shafiq Khan:

... want to do and we are there to assist them, that's it. We want them to become liberated, so our liberation will be insured by them because they know cost of losing liberation, they know cost of being enslaved. This is why we want and we have aspiration that they should be in politics, they should be in policymaking, they should be on big position. This is what we are dreaming for. We don't want them to become security guard, we don't want them to become waiter, we don't want them to become tailor. We want them to become leader of this society.

Ben Binversie:

It's fascinating how the goals of your work keep changing based on the needs and desires of the people that you're working with. I think that's a really good responsive model for this kind of work. You were telling me a little bit about some of the other organizations in India and elsewhere that do work in human trafficking, bride trafficking, but their goals are often more focused on the rescue aspect. While you certainly work with some of them, your goals are a little different. I think for someone listening to the stories of these women, sometimes it can be easy for them to think that, "Why would they not want to leave? Of course they should get out of the bad situation that they're in." I think it takes a lot of commitment to what they want and respecting their desires to actually follow through and make that happen.

Ben Binversie:

A big part of that, as you were talking a little bit about, is the community support systems and the discussion groups that you have. Can you talk a little bit about how those formed and what those conversations are like?

Shafiq Khan:

So most of the time, when we intervene in some village or some communities, some area, first thing is that if someone was purchased by someone else and someone is enslaved by some particular family, there was consent, and if not the consent, there was accountability and responsibility of the society. People of that particular community should be held accountable for that problem. These women are not leaving those areas because they should own that area. They should not be kicked out from that, they should struggle with that and they should win. This is why they are there, living there, and trying to create a women-led movement on the ground. Most of the time our conversation is about how and why society should respond to this problem and how should they own their responsibility and accountability about this?

Shafiq Khan:

Because if we are talking about the society who usually purchase those girls, you will find that most of the time these local families are going through with family dispute. Men used to say to their wives that, "One day I will kick you from the house and bring a borrow." It effects locals too, the men have... they can easily buy new girls. It is threat to local women as well. Most of the time we are focusing on this particular thing and also we are using religious text to convince people that why this is bad, and even your religion is saying that this is bad. Even your religion is saying that you should stand with oppressed. Every religion talks about for the oppressed people. We used to convince them with these ideas, and we used a different kind of their folklore, their stories, their local oral tradition because most of the common people belongs to oppressed class.

Shafiq Khan:

So that they have a story of operation, they have a story of different problems. We used to connect that story, that idea, and convince them that this happened in the past with you and this is happening in present with them. You are becoming villain and even if you are not owning this problem. Because most of the time people used to say like, "Okay, this is not my problem, this is their problem." They try to-

Ben Binversie:

Pass it off.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, but we are convincing them and bringing them on board and saying like, "This is your problem and you have to get involved with us to stop this." We have a lot, I mean, we are operational in 10 states and 20 districts and we have huge offices everywhere and all were given by community itself. Our organization have no institutional funding, we have no foreign funding, we have nothing. We have no organized budget structure, we have nothing. We are only three people are looking everything and we have amazing volunteers who used to do things and every district that means 20 people are working on the field who used to assist survivor leaders. Everything was started with the two, three people and now it became our organization have around 18,000 membership.

Shafiq Khan:

Now our organization is family of 18,000 people. Discussion of operation, discussion of culture, discussion of religion is becoming a major attraction point for the society, for the good people, and others to get involved with it. Everything is tactical. We are against trafficking, and not only the trafficking, we are against slavery, overall slavery. We are trying to teach them and we are trying to learn from them about the slavery. Information is not one way, it is two-way.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, so conversation.

Shafiq Khan:

It is conversation, so most of the time, they do share their problem and their opinion and we share our problem, our opinion with the community and we go together and then we finalize like this is happening and this should be crushed by the society.

Ben Binversie:

It's very surprising maybe that the communities where you've worked have been so supportive of you in some ways, but I also imagine you've faced a lot of challenges and maybe violence or threats of violence or pushback from communities where you've worked to solve this issue.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, so everything is there but most of the time, we talk about positive thing about the community. If community is seeing that you are not demonizing them, they will accept you. The time community will see like you are demonizing them, they will start disowning you, they will kick you out from the-

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, they don't want you there.

Shafiq Khan:

Yes, there are a lot of problem, there are threats and everything, but still we are using bikes to go in the community. We used to be maintain low profile with the community and we are happy for that. Some time they have slapped us but no one kill us for now so we are happy with that.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, as you should be.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, so these negative aspect of the community, we used to discuss all these things with the local people and we don't want to share it with a greater platform, our big platform, or anywhere outside of the community. Every problem we discuss should be discussed within a community. So every time when we discuss things, problems with the community, community used to come for rescuing us. The community itself has stand, took a stand for it because they know these people are not going to make complain and make headlines of attack or something like that. We try to not demonize the community, we always say like, "This is bad thing and this must be crushed. Without your support, this is not possible and we are not threat to you. Yes, there are problem-

Ben Binversie:

Focusing on the positive aspect.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, but-

Ben Binversie:

How do you work to create awareness and let people know and talk like you're coming to Grinnell. You're here to talk about this problem and what your organization is doing to solve it. How do you talk about the problem without demonizing the communities that you work in?

Shafiq Khan:

Most of the time we used to organize "Yatras," I mean, march. Every year we used to organize two march, one on foot and one on a car. In 2018, we organized march against bride trafficking from Assam to Himachal Pradesh. It was around 14,000 kilometer long because it was like round, round, round, round.

Ben Binversie:

Okay, circular routes.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, and we were talking with the different stakeholder, police, other government officials, community members, village leaders, Caste leaders, and everyone. No one is villain for us, not even traffickers. I would say that not even traffickers are villain for us. We just want to give them a prospective, a new idea to them. That in many case, I have seen like trafficker was not even aware that he is doing a crime by selling the girl and he was not lying. He was not aware about the new world order, he was not aware about the new things. He thought like she had no food here so I send her to that place and he was not aware about anything what is happening there. Even sometime traffickers used to come with inform us like, "I have organized this and that girl came here and he is abusing that girl and he's doing this, can you please help?" I have such examples.

Shafiq Khan:

Awareness is not speaking, awareness is a process. You have to involve them with your process, and you have to be with them to give them an example, what is slavery and what is equality? They should have contrast ideas. Awareness for us is a process and we used to involve each one, men, women, children, everyone with our field seminar. We used to call it a field seminar, we used to organize it, and everyone used to join that conversation. Trafficking survivors used to share their stories, their feelings, their hopes, and we used to interpret that. These men, women of local community used to discuss on those particular aspect and those particular things. We try to engage them with this and we also organized different kind of seminars, workshops, in colleges, schools. The young children, young generation would have enough knowledge about these things.

Shafiq Khan:

It is not about awaring people, it is about sensitizing people, people should not be aware about everything, it's okay. But they should be sensitized, they should have solidarity for the oppressed. It's process. Every Sunday, we have some kind of sensitization workshops and sensitizing seminar, sensitization talk in each village we are working.

Ben Binversie:

A lot of your work involves having difficult conversations with people.

Shafiq Khan:

True.

Ben Binversie:

What have you learned about how to handle that and the approach that you bring to starting that conversation and what the best tactics and ways are for opening those conversations up to create change and for people to think about things in new ways?

Shafiq Khan:

I would give you some example like we have rescued girl with the help of Caste [inaudible 00:56:11], Caste consults. Caste consults are most demonized organization in India. Yes, they do a lot of bad things, but we have used them in rescuing trafficking survivors. The problem with the society is simple, like most of the time change makers go there with the rule of law and they used to say like law is saying this so you have to do this way and not that way. They are not arguing and they are not fitting that on their, on that particular community's morality. Most of the time they say like, "This is law and-

Ben Binversie:

This is the law.

Shafiq Khan:

... and you have to do this." Most of the time, they used to afraid of the law and do that, but they are not convinced with that thing. Most of the time when we went there in the villages, we had started things discussing which affects them by this problem. We are working in destination of bride trafficking and most of the time when we open our conversation, we start conversation with saying how and why dowry is increasing, and how and why family dispute is increasing. Most of the time when we say like why family disparity is increasing, some women used to say like, "My husband was saying or my husband had said that he will bring a borrow or 'malky' woman, he will buy a girl from Assam and he kicked me out." Then we say, "Yes, this is the major problem." We had start the conversation about our cause.

Shafiq Khan:

Honestly, this is harming the society, this is not harming only the trafficking survivors, but also it is harming the women of this particular society who is buying those girls. We start things from that point, and then identify the problem and then start ask them to work against them. Help us in preventing this, and most of the time, those people used to show their solidarity with victims and then, No, a poor man do not deserve to be sold.” They used to take side with the victims, and this is really beautiful and I can forgive them for anything wrong they have done with us, our team. This is very, very good thing to do with the community.

Ben Binversie:

Now, you started doing this work almost 15 years ago.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, almost.

Ben Binversie:

How have things changed in those years in terms of-

Shafiq Khan:

Amazingly, yeah, amazingly. Initially, when I started this work, everyone was this was common. Every time you will ask how much the girl cost? This man would say like 15,000, 10,000 directly. But now even if someone have purchased some girl, they will try to say like, “No, I have not purchased this girl.” Trafficking in that particular area where we are working since long is really decreasing, and even people of local community is amazingly responding to the problem. The girl, the women or girl living in those particular area have solid support from the community. This is how things are changing. Even some girl got Panchayat land. Panchayat is a government body, a village body who used to take care of local public land and other things. Some girls was given that land by the Panchayat because she had no ancestral land and her so-called husband was died.

Shafiq Khan:

Maybe he was disabled or something, and the family is not willing to give them anything, that girl anything. So Panchayat came forward and the whole village came forward and said like, “She came here in this village and the man has died. It’s okay, we have to take care of her and we have to give her land to build her home and we have to give everything.” We are doing this, our girls are now visiting judges, our girls are now visiting police officers, and our girls are now meeting everyone. Now we are aspiring to contest election in that particular area. When I’m saying we, that means survivor leaders.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah.

Shafiq Khan:

Soon we will have some political leader from survivor leaders.

Ben Binversie:

Wow.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, so this is what we are dreaming for.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, those are big changes. When you started working on this, did you have in mind what your organization looks like now and the-

Shafiq Khan:

No.

Ben Binversie:

... could you have imagined these survivors as political leaders that you're training them?

Shafiq Khan:

In the past, no. I am worker, I am not philosopher, so dreaming is not my job. Survivor leaders are our leaders, they have to have vision. We are worker, we are there to connect them with solution. If they have some kind of problem, we will find a solution, that's our job. But how they will proceed further on how our organization will be built, this is not my job to think, this is their job to think. Even being founder and CEO of this organization, I have very less work, I have worked to prepare cases, I have worked to prepare arguments for the courts, and I have worked to decide if I should go in that particular area for work of researching and all. Most of the operational thing, that is not my job, that is survivor leader's job. We have 20 CBOs, and all those CBOs are led by survivor leaders.

Shafiq Khan:

They are major leaders, they are intervening in the case, and they are doing everything on ground. We have no stake in the ground now. They can do without us and this is amazing, this is what I wanted to do. If today I want to leave this organization, I can, work will not stop without me, and this is amazing. I wanted to create it, but yes, as organization, we have a lot of problem, we have a lot of limitations and everything and we enjoy it. We love our limitations, we enjoy our limitations. We don't want to become God, we just want to be a simple worker. Cool, yeah.

Ben Binversie:

You mentioned that you're talking about the structure of your organization and how you, for the longest time, did not receive any money, there's no formal structure to it. But what does it mean then to you and your organization to receive this prize from Grinnell College and how will that money be directed towards this effort?

Shafiq Khan:

That is amazing question. Yes, so, many people are asking this question. The prize money is divided in two parts.

Ben Binversie:

Two parts, yeah.

Shafiq Khan:

Second part, the organization part, is will be used for a standing organization and we need to buy some equipments and all for the work. That will be used there. About my personal money, that will be used in a unique work. We have established, at least, four companies in the past and none was succeeded. That those companies were about products made by survivors and that connection to the market. That was not succeeded because of our limitation, our monetary limitation, of course. We had nothing to pay to staff because that is company, so that is not what... you cannot run that with volunteers. You have to have full time staff there. We are planning to do that and some people are helping us. Even I would love to have someone from Grinnell if someone can be with that project supporting and helping. Even if they can help us in planning that company.

Shafiq Khan:

I have seen a lot of things here in Iowa, and I was connecting that to what product we were making. We wanted to supply some eco friendly things to hotels like slippers made of some bio-

Ben Binversie:

Biodegradable materials.

Shafiq Khan:

... products, yes. We also have some chairs and other things. We have planned to use that money in that particular project that is made by survivors but that cannot be market by survivors. We need to have some professional for that, and the entire money we will use for that and we will establish a company. This company will make profit and that profit will be sent to the organization for the survivor leaders. Because like our survival leaders are still working as wage workers and they are still working as agricultural laborers. We need to give them some more option to work on different adaptings. That is why I am trying to establish some kind of company. I have funded four companies and all will fail so it's okay to be failed. Yeah, I hope fifth will be-

Ben Binversie:

The charm, yeah.

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, so maybe, I don't know. If this will succeed, then things will be easy for our work. I'm not going to settle down here, I have more plan about doing things. I want survivor leaders to contest election, different election, if they will contest different election, then they will establish their identity and this will be amazing. This will become a movement. I just want to create a movement, I'm not seeing things like if I will become anybody. No, I'm not going to become anybody. I'm typical worker, so how about, yes, I'm trying to learn more and trying to document things of what we are doing. After this, I will sure try to write down everything of what we are doing. Because now I believe like, "Okay, I have done some work fuller."

Shafiq Khan:

Before this I was thinking, "I'm doing by my own and this is my idea and no one can understand it." I will become Marx, like good idea for nothing. That was not implemented anywhere, so idea, ideology is there and that is beautiful. But now I know like, "Okay, I'm doing something and it should be documented." Because people should know what we are doing and how we are exploiting things. We are most of the time... I am a non-religious. I have no faith in anything, personally. But we use religion for our movement, and for that, I used to study religion enough. I have studied a lot. This is good. "That looks like fiction." Every time when we read something, when I read something, "that looks like fiction." But you have to create some kind of argument against what is happening in the society. We need to do that.

Shafiq Khan:

These business, four businesses, were for survivor leaders. If you will visit their home now, you will take risk, that will inspire you. You will learn how to survive without money, you will learn how to survive without any support, how to survive with enemies. They're best teacher for anyone, I mean, not only me, if you will see things from their eyes, how they are living, how they are surviving life, and how they are happy, the most beautiful thing in their life is that they are not complaining for anything. I don't know how many of them are religious, many of them are not religious, but common thing is that they are happy. If you will go there and if you will meet them, you will be surprised to know how she is laughing and how she is happy in this condition. This will give you energy. Every time.

Shafiq Khan:

Most of the time when we are thinking about some new plan, we used to see things like what if this plan is going to help that particular woman or not. If this is going to help her, we used to do that without being afraid of anything. That is kind of affection with those people, I don't know. Okay, and this is hypothetical question and answer to because I really don't know why. Then everything is

not necessarily have some reason to happen, like something happened without reason so this has happened without reason. But I will establish a company, and look every time when I'm saying I'm against slavery, I'm against trafficking, that doesn't mean I have nothing to do with gay rights and I have nothing to do with environment. I connect each and every problem with one thing, slavery is something. Why people are oppressing those gay people and others? Because they are not following their notion.

Shafiq Khan:

What is slavery? Slavery is not... Look, once upon a time slavery was in a chain, people had chain, so you can visibly see like this man is slave, he have the chain. Nowadays, chain is invisible. Chain is here, so we are fighting, we are more great than Abraham Lincoln, okay? Because we are surviving a slavery system which has problem here. Everyone wants people to follow their very idea, their orientation, their things. This is our problem.

Shafiq Khan:

Look, I was really happy yesterday when I saw this town. Okay, I'm sorry for sharing this and this is personal. I was really happy when I saw agriculture land, big agricultural land, but then I learned that this is not individual farmers, this is corporations. I said fine. These are not agricultural land, these are factories. These are part of problem, and then I saw Grinnell, what? Something, Grinnell Farmer.

Ben Binversie:

The Heritage Farm.

Shafiq Khan:

Oh, Heritage Farm, yes, that was amazing. This was beautiful. This inspired me like yes, we need this. This is against the slavery system. You cannot save your seeds—this is corporate slavery. Slavery is not only about bride trafficking, it is a broader subject. Bride trafficking will be done the day other form of slavery will be done. This is a greater struggle, and if we cannot fight with everyone, we can at least think like this is bad and this is good. We should have a basic idea about that.

Ben Binversie:

Maybe during your visit you'll find some students here who are interested in helping your project because I think-

Shafiq Khan:

Yeah, that would help me a lot. For now, we have two people on board, they are volunteers just helping me in planning.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, bringing the concepts to life.

Shafiq Khan:

When the award was announced now I got excited. Not because of money, okay? Because of that... This thing, this unorganized idea was acknowledged by a college established by an abolitionist, the man who was trying to help slaves in escaping slavery. This mean a lot to me as a learner, as a worker. This is also special because this is not corporate house. Most of the time, corporate house used to acknowledge you for no meaning. They know nothing about you, they know nothing about your cause, they know nothing, you are working as them but they're still there honoring you or acknowledging you or giving you something. Why?

Shafiq Khan:

This means a lot to me because it's an education institution which has a different idea about different things. Because most of the time when your recognition come from some academic institution you know you are worthy and it makes you feel like, "Yes, you were doing something which needed to be done." This recognition is a validation for us as an organization and as a person, me too. It will encourage me to find a new way with a new idea and work continuously with these things. It means a lot to me and my organization.

Ben Binversie:

I want to talk a little bit more about your role as a man in all of this. How have you used your power in these patriarchal systems to influence other men and empower women? How do you make sure that you are constantly becoming a better man?

Shafiq Khan:

This is about becoming a better human. This is not about becoming a better man. Being a man, I have different kind of privilege to be in society, and being man I have limitations too. I tried to cross my limitations being man and I try to engage other people using my privilege to be a man. Most of the time when people are men, when we rescue someone, some girl... so I want to share first about experience of a man working on this women cause. Most of the time when we rescue some girl, they used to see a man in front of her and all problem done in her life, what she has survived, was happened because of a man or two man or three men, a group of men. They think like I am one of the men. Initially, we, as a person, I face a lot of fire from them. I should face her frustration and have anger, as a man.

Shafiq Khan:

Then, after some time, after a month, they realize and face of mens became saved. She's thinking like, "Okay, now I should believe that some men are good people too. Not all men are bad. Being

man, I'm trying to save men from becoming evils in the eyes of survivors. This is amazing, and second thing is that most of the time if you are man, you can easily connect with other-

Ben Binversie:

Other men, yeah.

Shafiq Khan:

... men and you can argue on behalf of the survivor or women on different issues. Look, the patriarchy is oppressive, not only for men.

Ben Binversie:

Not only for women, yeah.

Shafiq Khan:

It is also oppressive for men. I have seen people who killed themselves because of some patriarchal issue. I have seen that and most of the time I try to connect those things. Like every person have multiple identity, different kind of different layer of identity. We need to connect that particular identity with that. Sometime we have hear in that the girl was eloped with some boy and her brother was killed himself, he killed himself just because of honor and patriarchy. This is something we need to reflect upon and we need to ask men to reflect upon. This is easy to do, and equality is not an evil thing for men. Liberation of women is actually liberation of men too. You will be liberated from protecting others, your sisters, mothers, daughters. You'll not need to protect anyone if you are liberated, and if women are liberated, if they are not sex object.

Shafiq Khan:

Most of the time when we say protecting women, what people think, most of the time we think like we are protecting her from sexual harassment. We never thought about economic protection or some other kind of protection. Because women, for men, women are just sex object, be it girlfriend, be she's mother, be she's sister, anyone else. Liberation is needed for everyone, every gender, and patriarchy is something which will drag you into protectionism just because it allow you to encourage attack on other gender. Patriarchy is aggressive idea, and that is not going to help anyone, not men, not women. We need to have a basic sense of equality and liberation of each of the women and men. This is so easy to convince them, and most of the time people are happy about it.

Shafiq Khan:

Last time we were on a march against bride traffic in 2018, I met a young group, they all were men. That villager was saying when he was sharing that why trafficking is happening, this was my question and he said like because of us. I said, "How?" He said like, "If my sister will be in love with someone, I will oppose her and kill her." She used to elope with her boyfriend, she will run away

from us with her boyfriend and that man can sell her. The girl should have confidence to bring her boyfriend into home so we can check his validity and background and everything. We are responsible for such bride trafficking and all. This was a villager and he was just a young man. This was not new, everyone know that. We just need to connect that fuse now so the light will be lit again.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, the solutions are already there and it does-

Shafiq Khan:

True, so this is what we learned in our first march.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, it's interesting how that-

Shafiq Khan:

...Question and answer, both are with same people, so we just need to connect that.

Ben Binversie:

Yeah, the problem and the solution are right there in the community and it is-

Ben Binversie:

It is interesting how it's come full circle that you learned it from the very first march-

Shafiq Khan:

Yes, we just need to understand the community, their idea, how they think, and that the time we will learn that how they are thinking and what they are thinking, then things will be easy for you. You can easily use them in your movement.

Ben Binversie:

Well, thank you, Shafiq, for your dedication to this cause and eradicating bride trafficking and really working to empower the women that have suffered as victims and now look to live lives ideally liberated from these systems. Congratulations to you and your organization for being honored with the Grinnell College Innovator for Social Justice Prize and best of luck to you and your organization as you move forward.

Shafiq Khan:

Thank you so much, thank you.

Ben Binversie:

Shafiq Khan is the founder and CEO of EMPOWER PEOPLE and the winner of the 2019 Grinnell College Innovator for Social Justice Prize. He's been on campus all week, his first time outside of India and he's been soaking up all Grinnell has to offer. Visiting classes and talking nonstop with everyone and loving it, and we're loving it too. There have been a number of events for prize week, Shafiq talked about how he uses folklore and storytelling to talk with communities about bride trafficking. We also had a panel discussion with lawyers, social workers, a police chief, and other people involved in anti-trafficking work here in Iowa and throughout the states. It was remarkable how trafficking takes so many forms and is unique to different places with different causes, conditions, and solutions. There's so much to learn.

Ben Binversie:

If there's one takeaway from that, though, I think it's that trafficking is going on everywhere. It's not a far away or remote issue, it is almost certainly going on in your communities right now. It can feel like an insurmountable problem, but there are resources, there are ways to make an impact. I think Shafiq's visit has encouraged a lot of us here to start thinking about how we can make an impact. He's particularly inspiring, I think, because his testimony that change starts small and doesn't take money or a big organization or a mission statement, it requires an idea. His formal organization, in a sense, consists of a small office, a couple laptops, and a few bicycles. Now, it also consists of 18,000 people, but it's a totally different way of change making.

Ben Binversie:

You can learn more about your Shafiq Khan and EMPOWER PEOPLE as well as the Grinnell Prize and its past winners and see the beautiful oil painting done by our very own Tilly Woodward inspired by Shafiq's work. And see pictures from this week's events on our website grinnell.edu/podcast. You can also connect with Shafiq on social media. A big part of the Grinnell prize and bringing the winner to campus is making connections. I wish everyone could have had the chance to sit and talk to Shafiq, but this podcast is the next best thing. I hope if you feel connected to this and want to talk about it, or get involved in any way, please reach out to me or Shafiq. That's it for this episode. If you made it to the end, congratulations. Thank you for tuning in, and I really hope you got as much from hearing our conversation as I have through my interactions with him this week. I encourage you to share and continue this conversation.

Ben Binversie:

Next time we're going to talk to another incredible person, Edith Renfrow Smith, the first African American woman to graduate from the college in 1937. If you're doing the math in your head, I'll save you the time, she's 104 years old and counting. She received an honorary degree last year at commencement and she sat down to talk with me about growing up in Grinnell and her remarkable life. That's next time on All Things Grinnell. Music for today's show comes from Brett Newski and Podington Bear. If you'd like to contact the show, email us at podcast@grinnell.edu, or check out

our website, grinnell.edu/podcast for more information about the guests from today's show. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast wherever you listen. I'm your host, Ben Binversie. Make some change Grinnellians.