

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### SONALI KOLHATKAR: “RISING UP” FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, WITH YES! MAGAZINE

**LAURA FLANDERS:** What drives an independent journalist and what does it take to survive independently without the cash or cachet of the commercial media establishment? While I have a few thoughts about that myself, so does today's guest, Sonali Kolhatkar. Originally from India and born and raised in Dubai, Sonali pivoted from studying astrophysics to journalism in the early 2000s and soon she was the host of "Uprising with Sonali" a drive time show that debuted in 2003 on the Pacifica radio station, KPFK in Los Angeles. That became "Rising Up with Sonali" which in turn became syndicated on radio and also on Free Speech TV as a television program. Then having become the host of the longest running drive time radio program in southern California, hosted by a woman of color, in 2023, Sonali made a move joining forces with the solutions focused YES! Magazine to serve as that magazine's racial justice editor and the host of a new weekly program. "YES! Presents Rising Up with Sonali." That show continues to air on Free Speech TV and Pacifica radio affiliates among others. Sonali is also senior correspondent for the Independent Media Institute's Economy For All project and co-directs the Afghan Women's Mission of which she is one of the founders. Somewhere along the way, she had time to write a book which came out in June of this year. It's called "Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice" and it was published by City Lights. She also sings, plays ukulele, makes art and bakes. How does she do it? We're going to find out. Sonali Kolhatkar, welcome to the program. I'm so glad to see you old friend.

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** Thank you so much, Laura, for having me on. It's just a wonderful pleasure to be with you.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** I try to kind of center myself in these conversations by taking a moment at the very beginning just to kind of think about who's on my mind in my heart right now, and I'll ask you who's uppermost in your thoughts as we begin this conversation.

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** Well, you and I are speaking in mid-October and it is a moment where the world's attention is on the people, the Palestinian people and Israelis. And I'm thinking about how do we center the complex humanity of people that we are told are totally different from one another? And that fits in so well with all of the things that I've been thinking about in writing this new book that I have, which is how do we tell stories that humanize us and prevent others from otherizing us if you will. And use the stories as an armor to protect our dignity, to protect our human rights. And it's not easy and it's never reductive and it's never straightforward, but that's first and foremost in my mind. And that can be applied to people everywhere, to people

of color here in the United States, to indigenous people in every country in the world and to anywhere where there's human conflict.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** As wars rage in so much of our world, but particularly in respect to the Israel-Hamas war at this time, are you seeing any change that cheers you in the coverage?

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** You know, it used to be that when such things happen, and of course, what we saw in Israel was quite unprecedented it was really, we hadn't seen the level of massacres of Israelis as we've just seen, but in the past there's been some similar formula Hamas will go in and do an attack. Israel will respond with relentless and far more disproportionate force and all the cheerleaders for Israel will come out. We're seeing little hesitation now. We're seeing, for example the Harvard University campus is roiled in this debate because Harvard University didn't come right out in favor of backing Israel unconditionally. Pro-Palestinian voices have been doing a lot of narrative work over the past 10, 20 years. Well, they've been doing it for a lot longer. But because of maybe social media and digital media and the space that they're getting, we're seeing the narrative shifting around Palestinian voices and what it really means to resist.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** I will join with you in saying I think there is a tenor shift not in at the leadership level, but at the public level and at the level of media, I am seeing more Israeli voices brought into our conversation and a few more Palestinian ones and some acknowledgement that journalists are having a very hard time getting reports out of Gaza under siege. We have traveled these kind of parallel tracks for so many years and I remember when you first came to my attention, really with the Afghan Women's Mission and the work that you took on to bring the stories again, that emphasis on narrative bring the stories of Afghan women and children and families to American audiences when mostly Americans knew very little of anything having to do with Afghanistan until 9/11 of course. Somewhere in our minds and hearts there also has to be room for the people of Afghanistan who've just sustained tremendous damage from earthquakes once again.

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** Absolutely. And I'm still working closely with the women that I formed ties with over 20 years ago. It's a phenomenal feminist organization, Afghanistan's oldest feminist organization called RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. And what that taught me that experience of getting to know RAWA, the women of RAWA, seeing how the media here in the United States and across the west reduced Afghan women to these two dimensional blue clad faceless creatures. And then seeing the reality of who Afghan women were, taught me such a huge lesson early in my career, right? It's so much easier to say we're going to save Afghan women and bring these orientalist and imperialist notions and white savior notions to war when we're talking about helpless, supposedly helpless Brown people on the other side of the planet. And what RAWA taught me was that people that we

otherwise, people that we reduced to two dimensions or just images on paper, have agency are fighting for their own rights, don't need our help in saving them as much as they need us to get out of their way or maybe take away the weapons that we've given their enemies, I understood what solidarity really meant, which was providing a platform for people who've been oppressed helping them tell their stories, getting out of the way when I needed to. But then, you know, being the translator that I needed to be for American taxpayers who it's my job as journalist to educate, illuminate to help understand what our tax dollars are doing. And so Afghanistan and the women of Afghanistan taught me so much. They continue to teach me so much, which is that we cannot reduce people to a few words. We certainly cannot when we are thinking about bombs targeting them or them being victims of poverty and poor infrastructure, we absolutely cannot think of them as having any less dignity than you or I do here in the United States.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** I remember when, I think it was Laura Bush at the time gave her famous speech about why the US needed to come to the rescue of Afghan women after 9/11 that it was the women of RAWA who said, no, no, imperialism is imperialism is imperialism. We've had enough colonial intervention. What we need is support to make ourselves free. As US forces finally left decades later. What was the position of RAWA and what do you hear from those women today you say you stayed in touch?

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** Yeah, RAWA was always very clear that every outsider unless they were coming unarmed to help, was not wanted in their country. That included the United States. It included the Soviet Union and Russia. It included Iran and Pakistan. And of course that didn't earn them, that many friends here on the US left because a lot of people on the US left didn't understand that when RAWA was critical of the Taliban, they were not necessarily on the side of the United States war.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** We like our binaries in the United States.

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** Exactly. So RAWA has been fighting against, fighting nonviolently against the Taliban, against the homegrown fundamentalists armed by the United States. And when the longest war as the US war in Afghanistan became the longest war in the US history came to an ostensible close. RAWA was certainly happy to see one less fighting force in their nation, fomenting destruction. And today what RAWA really wants is, again, to not be forgotten. This is what they wanted before the Taliban entered Afghanistan. This is what they wanted before the September 11th attacks. It's what they wanted after because once the news media kind of died down and the war settled into a steady state the cameras went away again. And it's what they want now, don't forget the people of Afghanistan because they remain the victims of our taxpayer funded destruction and simply leaving doesn't erase it either. And so yeah, I talked to them about how we can continue to help fund their projects, their health and educational projects from US donations here.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Now, there are some stories and Afghanistan is one that are much harder to cover as an independent journalist meaning it's much harder to go there, it's more expensive. One has less protection than one might if one belonged to some big well endowed commercial media outlet. Have you ever thought, oh, I'd rather go work for a network somewhere. I'd be able to do stories I can't as an independent.

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** You know, there's so many opportunities and advantages to being in a corporate funded industry. You can have an army of producers, you can have the resources that it takes to get things done. Although that is changing. The downside is that you can't just adhere to the fundamental tenets of why journalism is important. You have to adhere to the corporate bottom line of the corporation that you are working for. Because the majority of commercial news media, by definition are commercial and they are profit seeking corporations. So the bottom line is the most important thing. So you could be covering the most crucial undercovered stories, but if you're not capturing eyeballs and delivering them to their advertisers you are not getting the ratings that their boss wants you to get. You stand in danger of being cut. And of course, my name is hard to pronounce. I have a bit, I have a weird accent that people can't quite place for all of these reasons. I can't be, I'm not able to be boxed in.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** What strikes me more than anything Sonali and why I relish the freedom that I do is that we get to choose which stories are important. And for all the good individuals who try to do their best in inside corporate media, you only have to watch particularly television news these days to see that a very limited number of stories are covered. And they're covered over and over again by different reporters, sometimes, often not, same reporter on the same show over and over. But what you don't see is any different selection of topic. And I think that's the freedom that I most appreciate, that we can ask different questions, pursue different stories and really bring different perspectives to the news and redefine what the news is in a way that's exciting to me. Now, you have just launched a new show that is a great example of that.

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** You're right, there's such a narrow spectrum of topics that the commercial media covers. But I have to say, unfortunately, even in progressive media we tend to sometimes fall into that trap following the headlines. And for so many years I covered breaking news and it was debilitating mentally. It fuels cynicism when we see all of the things that are wrong with the world. And in a way we're sort of taking a lead from the commercial media because that's where the eyeballs are. But what I have really pivoted toward in this stage of my career, in large part thanks to YES! Magazine and YES! Media is this idea that wherever there are things that are wrong with the world, there are people that are working to fix them no matter what. Just because that's the human spirit to sound a little cliché, but there are people working on grassroots levels to fix problems in different ways. They're doing them with varying degrees of success. That's where the exciting front of organizing and change is happening. And

that's often where media simply don't cover what's going on, and then when something amazing happens we're caught off guard. So that's where I'm focusing in now. And I know, Laura, you and I are part of the, you've been doing it a lot longer than I have. I consider you a mentor and someone who's lead I've followed and a role model for doing this kind of journalism. It's not just a lot more positive for me feeling hopeful about the world, but I think for my audiences, because solutions journalism can fuel a hope that and a promise that if there are people here doing this about their problems I can do the same.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Here's the trailer. Introducing "YES! Presents Rising Up with Sonali" announcing this new partnership with YES! Magazine.

**[TRAILER AUDIO]:** "YES! Presents Rising Up with Sonali," your weekly antidote to the doom and gloom of mainstream news, lifting up solutions that bring us closer to economic, racial, gender, and environmental justice. We'll explore how grassroots communities in the US and beyond are reshaping our world for the better. Whether it's re-imagining public safety, promoting sustainable projects to make fossil fuels obsolete, building a fair economy or pushing a diversifying nation to live up to its democratic ideals. We'll explore the front lines of justice driven work, abolition, reparations, land back, abortion access, trans rights, labor organizing and so much more.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Congratulations. This is like two best friends coming together YES! Magazine and you, I couldn't be happier. Is there a story that stands out that you've already covered or that you've gotten the works to cover that you particularly want to bring to this audience?

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** So many of us in the country today are trying to make sense of why white supremacy is resurging are trying to make sense of why we're seeing the attacks on transgender people, on people of color, on voting rights, on books on critical race theory. And so I wrote this piece, a reported story for YES!'s growth issue where we look at the fact that the demographics of our nation are changing, you know, faster than we even expected in a way that is fueling this great roiling happening in the nation. And white conservatives in particular are terrified of the prospect of being minorities, right? Those of us who have been minorities in this country are responding by saying there's nothing to fear. I spoke with people like Steve Phillips who's long looked at demographic change. I covered the Tennessee Three, you know these young people of color who are entering office and who are being silenced but are nonetheless continuing to rise and speak up. And it's part of what I also write in my new book "Rising Up" and these narratives that we absolutely need to start embracing.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Let me ask you about that. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd, there were a lot of commitments made by media and banks and all sorts of institutions. So they

were going to do better and more. And we don't know everything that they may have tried but one of the visible things seems to be a lot of people of color or some people of color brought into media, brought into institutions. And I think there's a difference between that and the sort of narrative shift that you are talking about.

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** When we talk about DEI initiatives. The D and the I part of DEI are fairly toothless. We've been doing it for a long time. Diversity, equity, inclusion. Diversity, I mean, since the 1980s Benetton ads we've had diversity, right? The US Supreme Court even before Ketanji Brown Jackson was on could have been considered an inclusive body because we had one black justice on there. But the E part of DEI, which is where the meat of our desire for racial justice lies, which is equity. That's where we need to center the storytelling that we need to do. And so in the book I talk about how we are our stories storytelling and intentional storytelling in particular, which is what narrative is, shapes our culture. Shapes our views of everything, shapes our views of each other, our, of government, of what we expect from one another. And when we tell our stories it's so much harder to dehumanize us and to objectify us. And you know, the mass narrative setting industries such as Hollywood, pop culture, our news media have been rife with racist narratives seeking to stereotype in particular people of color, that's changing dramatically. Hollywood is changing in part because people of color have been clawing their way into the writer's rooms and the executive suites demanding to be heard. Black Twitter is pushing Hollywood with the hashtag 'Oscar so white'. And of course what happened in the streets in 2020 pushed a lot of institutions, shamed them really into realizing that they need to do so much better on allowing people of color to tell our own stories simply by being present, by shaping the narratives and that is a critical part of it. We can't just have policy changing, without culture shifting because it doesn't stick. We need mass buy-in from the whole nation or at least the majority of the nation that people of color deserve to be here, deserve to be part of this democracy. If we just do narrative shifting and no policy shifting, then it's just PR, right? It is so critical for us to think about, for example, how we portray police on screen, how we portray guns on screen. I have a whole chapter in the book on 'copaganda', which may not, on its surface may seem like something around racial justice but policing and how much money societies put into our police departments, cities put into our police department, coming at the expense of social services is where the nuts and bolts of racial justice lie. And Hollywood, over and over again, inadvertently perhaps justifies bloated police budgets by normalizing policing on screen, by equating policing with safety, by showing police characters, especially in scripted crime TV shows, which is the most popular genre of scripted shows by showing police as noble do-gooders and who constantly break the law, but they always do it for good reason and they get the audiences cheering on cops. Those of us who are people of color, especially Black-Americans who see the reality, have a different experience with police, but if it's only white people writing the stories they're going to write what they know. And if white people have very positive experiences with police in real life, they're going to put that in the scripts, they're going to put

that on our screens. And then when it comes time to talking about moving funding away from policing and toward the things that actually matter, Hollywood is there cheering on policing.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** There's so much on our minds at every moment, on some days I think it's overwhelming on other days I think it's an invitation to break open and shift. How do you deal with those days where it feels overwhelming? Or is that when you pick up the ukulele?

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** Well, yes, partly, you and I are journalists. It's our job to monitor everything that's happening everywhere we possibly can. But we are living in a moment in time when we have so much information at our fingertips. And frankly, humans weren't really built to like handle knowing everything that's happening all over the world. Maybe the far reaches of our tribe or village, and maybe the edges of the next region. But we have so much information and from audiences. If you're not a journalist, first of all, take a break from the news, don't get overwhelmed. Think about what you can control that matters to you in your community and focus on that joyfully. Take the time to spend your days as much as you have free time and disposable time with the people that you love and talk to them even the ones you disagree with. Talk to them about the differences that you might have in a loving way. Try to think about those things that you can control. And maybe you are a Palestinian-American who has family or an Afghan-American who has family in a war zone. Hold them in your thoughts too and make sure your local journalists and your local politicians are doing the right thing by those people that you love dear. In terms of coverage, in terms of policy, and focus your efforts because we can't do it all. If we try, we're going to fail, we're going to burn out and we're going to check out and we can't have that.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** We can do it. We can hold Israelis, Jews, Palestinians and those in Gaza, in diaspora as well in our hearts at the same time, I believe it. We just need to exercise those muscles. "YES! Presents Rising Up with Sonali" and of course the book "Rising Up: The Power of Narrative and Pursuing Racial Justice." Sonali, thank you so much for joining us. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

**SONALI KOLHATKAR:** Thank you so much, Laura.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** It's remained true even in the days since my interview with Sonali that there has been more diversity in the coverage of this Israel-Hamas war. That may not be saying a lot, but it is saying a little and I've been particularly struck by the number of journalists who've managed to bring us voices from inside Gaza who can describe in intimate detail what it's like to live under Israeli bombardment and also what it's been like to live these past 17 years in what amounts to an open air prison, under an Israeli blockade. From inside Israel, we've heard a diversity of viewpoints too and I've been particularly struck by how many Israeli Jews have spoken about their lost loved ones. People lost to the terror attacks of October 7th and described

those people, their brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and grandmothers as peace activists, people who worked their entire lives for peace in the region and worked with others. So my question to journalists is this, if what bleeds leads fair enough but what about what follows? Where's been the coverage of Gaza these last 17 years? Where's been the coverage of those decades of people in the region working for no more war? If in this attention economy the only currency we pay attention to is violence, then we are destining ourselves and our colleagues to yet more generations of this cycle of blood. Can we do better? I believe we can. And I'm glad you're here with me on this journey. You can find the full uncut version of every conversation we record for this show through a subscription to our free audio podcast all the information's at the website. In the meantime, stay kind, stay curious and thanks for joining me for "The Laura Flanders Show." I'm Laura. For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all at [lauraflanders.org](http://lauraflanders.org).