



Episode 5: Boma Brown-West Chemical soup: The quest to create a toxic-free marketplace

Boma Brown-West ([00:05](#)):

This work is very personal to me. As a black woman, I have two sisters. I have my mom, I have my grandmother. I have my brother. I have extended family. I think about how this is a form of discrimination that's built in. It adds a whole other level to my sense of dedication, to our vision of a toxic-free marketplace.

Yesh ([00:43](#)):

I'm Yesh Pavlik Slenk, and this is Degrees: real talk about planet-saving careers, from Environmental Defense Fund. What would you say if I invited you to rub a chemical soup all over your face... and then wash your hair with it? Sadly, my guest today says that we're all doing exactly that-- not only from the additives in the food that we eat, but from ingredients in the makeup and the shampoos and the lotions and the soaps things that we apply to our bodies every single day, Boma Brown-West is the Director of Consumer Health at Environmental Defense Fund. And Boma says that there are over 40,000 chemicals used in our consumer products. Collectively we bring at least 200 million pounds of toxic chemicals home from the store each year. We bring them home to our kitchens. We bring them in our bathrooms, our kids play rooms. And when we consider just hair and skincare, a disproportionate number of those chemicals are found in products created for and marketed to women of color. That makes my anxiety go through the roof. When I think about this. So listeners here's some good news: BOMA is leading the charge to eliminate toxic chemicals from our consumer products and from our food. And her vision is to create a "new normal" where every aisle of every store is toxic free. So listener, pull up a chair and check out this fascinating conversation, covering everything from the ingredients in your deodorant, to how to transform from one career to a totally different one, who is on Boma's personal Board of Directors, and a bounty of other wisdom that will inspire you. Boma Brown-West, welcome to Degrees.

Boma Brown-West ([02:31](#)):

Thank you. Thank you. I'm really looking forward to today's chat.

Yesh ([02:34](#)):

Me too! Well, Boma, this very morning. I gave my toddler a bath and I washed her hair. I made breakfast for her and for my husband, I showered and used lotions. And even though this is a podcast, I put on a little makeup for you today. Uh, I thought I was doing good things for us. Tell me what I really did.

Boma Brown-West ([02:55](#)):

Well. I mean, you were grooming, so that is great. Um, you're keeping, you're keeping that, um, habit going even during the pandemic. I think most people would probably think nothing about the products that they use on their bodies every single day. But unfortunately what we know in our, in our work at EDF and in the environmental health space, is that consumer products are one of our sources of



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exposure to toxic chemicals. And, you know, as consumers, we're not the ones making the decisions about what's going into these products. We're using them to watch our hair. We're using them to, to feed ourselves those kinds of things.

Yesh ([03:37](#)):

And just so that our audience really understands what we're talking about. When we say consumer products, it is everything right. I mean, this is a huge category. It's everything you eat. It's everything you put on your body. It's your toothpaste, it's your toothbrush. It's the clothes that we wear. Am I missing anything?

Boma Brown-West ([03:57](#)):

Uh, yeah, it's the furniture we sit on. It's the blankets we might wrap around ourselves on a cold day. It is, as you said, it is everything. It is the phone that I am speaking into right now. Right? When we think about what does it mean to be a consumer? It's all the things that we buy at the store, we buy online.

Yesh ([04:18](#)):

What are some of the worst offending chemicals out there and what are they doing to all of us?

Boma Brown-West ([04:24](#)):

So when I look at chemicals of concern, one piece of it is the hazard that chemicals can introduce, right? And then another piece of it is the ubiquity: how often are we exposed to those highly toxic chemicals? We are definitely concerned about chemicals that are known as endocrine disruptors. These are chemicals that can have an impact on our endocrine system, which is in charge of our hormones. And, you know, plays a part in all of our bodily functions. You know, another class that's been getting a lot of attention is called PFAS. You might see them in the news referred to as "forever chemicals" because they are here forever. They do not break down. They do not go away. And you might think, why are they here? Well, because they have some really strong stain and water repellency qualities. They have been used in clothing. They've been used in kitchenware, they've even been used in food service materials. But the problem is there's been a steady body of work showing that they have long-term negative impacts on our health and on the environment. They are the forever chemicals, right?

Yesh ([05:47](#)):

And Boma, women use twice as many products as men. And women of color purchased nine times as many beauty products as white women. So this makes the toxic chemical problem far more dangerous for women of color than white women. You say that you're fighting for "beauty justice". As a woman of color. This is a personal issue for you. Where were you when your eyes were first opened to this problem?



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Boma Brown-West ([06:17](#)):

That is a good question. First time I really realized this. I was taking a tour of a store with my team, when I was pretty new to the job. So this is going back like seven years ago, right? We were talking about the need for safer products. We are identifying products on the shelf. We are each talking about, Oh yeah, I use this product. I use that one. And I opened my team's eyes to, oh, hey, usually you can see a part of the aisle where a store might call it their multi-ethnic products. It's always plays that has a lot of hair oils, some shampoos, also some relaxers, that kind of thing. There's research. That's shown that there are a greater number of chemicals of concern that pop up and products that are marketed to women of color. And, you know, then I also could think that to my childhood, like, Whoa, what were some of those neon-colored products that I was using? And my mom was using on my hair

Yesh ([07:23](#)):

Boma, how did you feel? Did that scare you?

Boma Brown-West ([07:27](#)):

I mean, it definitely scares me now, but you know, at that time I was a little girl, right. My mom's braiding my hair. And then as I got older, I was going to the hair salon. So I didn't really think anything about the smell of certain products, the colors of certain products. It was simply about: does this product do what it needs to do for, for my hair? Right? And the issue is that we as consumers, we believe that if something is on the store shelf, that the company has demonstrated to the government, that the product is safe. And unfortunately that is simply not the case. We don't have that full assurance when it comes to food. When it comes to beauty products, when it comes to many consumer products. We've been pushing for a while around stronger government oversight and corporate missions dedicated to eliminating toxic ingredients from products. And instead flooding the marketplace with products made with ingredients that are demonstrably safer.

Yesh ([08:36](#)):

Well, thank you because-- I'm I'm with you. I'm I'm with your mom. You know, I completely put my trust in those products and those companies, and that oversight is happening in a way that it's not going to put my health at risk or my daughter's health at risk. So my mom is not a makeup wearer-- never has been. All I really ever learned about wearing makeup growing up in the nineties. I learned from those teen magazines that everybody read. So probably had a lot of those neon products you're talking about. And truthfully the beauty aisle intimidates me. Uh, and as a white woman, I have a lot of choices to choose from a lot of the brands that are hoping to catch my eye, advertise things like "free of this" and "free of that", and those types of choices. I'm noticing when I do have the courage to walk down that aisle are available to me. And I'm wondering, are we seeing the same thing when it comes to products being marketed to women of color?



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Boma Brown-West ([09:37](#)):

Unfortunately, we're not seeing as many of those options hitting products that are marketed to women of color. And that's a big problem because there is already an imbalance in terms of the exposure to toxic ingredients that women of color face versus white women. So just a few stats for you: compared with white women, women of color have higher levels of beauty product related environmental chemicals in their bodies. And this is independent of socioeconomic status. So perfect example: African-American women are more likely to use hair products that contain endocrine-disrupting chemicals in them as opposed to white women. And we, we see this play out in other types of products too. So unfortunately, skin lightening products, and sometimes they masquerade as other types of products, like complexion finishing and stuff like that. But it's been documented that a number of those products have high levels of mercury. Uh, we also know that some common beauty product ingredients, including methylparaben, which is a type of preservative-- shows up in the levels and African-American bodies at two times higher concentrations than in white women. And so all of this is to say that we need to ensure that where the need is greatest in products marketed to women of color, we are starting to see more change, more improvement, safer options, and a removal of toxic chemicals.

Yesh ([11:17](#)):

Those statistics are shocking. And, and frankly, they are shameful. If listeners could see my face right now, you would, you, uh, it's probably the face that you're making, listening to those statistics-- and Boma as a professional, actually working on this, how did you feel when you started getting involved in this work, when you realized that this was going on, that the data was reflecting, this, this really crazy and shocking disparity in these products.

Boma Brown-West ([11:47](#)):

Um, first this work is very personal to me, just strictly as a consumer. But then as a black woman, I have two sisters. I have my mom, I have my grandmother. I have my brother. I have extended family. Essentially, the way that you have reacted to this information is how I feel about it on a daily basis. I think about how this is the form of discrimination that's kind of built in to our society. And I'm already very passionate about this work on safer products, but it adds a whole other level to my sense of dedication, to our vision of a toxic-free marketplace,

Yesh ([12:34](#)):

An equitable and toxic-free marketplace.

Boma Brown-West ([12:36](#)):

Absolutely, absolutely.



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Yesh ([12:39](#)):

Where people can shop and feel like it has been addressed and the companies are taking responsibility for it.

Boma Brown-West ([12:45](#)):

Yeah. We always go back to: "no matter what your race is, no matter what your gender is, no matter what your means are, everyone should be able to be using safe products in their homes with their families".

Yesh ([13:01](#)):

What is your team trying to do to change this? Obviously it's understanding what's out there. It's understanding why these companies are using these products, but then how can you start to change that conversation with these companies?

Boma Brown-West ([13:16](#)):

There are a couple of things. We definitely work closely with our policy experts at EDF who work on helping us get stronger laws, stronger government oversight. So that's part of the puzzle. But then we also think about: what are the business processes that have to change? Because at the end of the day, this is all about the decisions about what goes into products. And it's about the philosophies that a company has when it's making those decisions.

Yesh ([13:45](#)):

But it's what makes that product special, right? If you're approaching big brands that we would all recognize and talking about some of their landmark products that have been around for a long time, people buy those products again and again, because they like the way that it works. So when you're asking these companies to change, you're asking them to change basically the core of their product. What are you up against when you have conversations with companies? How do they react when, when you approach them with this topic?

Boma Brown-West ([14:15](#)):

How do they react? Well, um, they're so excited, right? Yeah, exactly. You got at the crux of it. When we talk about other sustainability issues, like when we talk about energy usage or, um, water usage, when a product's being made, you are talking about process decisions, right? When we talk about the ingredients, we're getting at the core of what makes that product, what it is. And sometimes that's also talking about the "secret sauce" of the product, like what is in recipe versus my competitor's recipe. I don't want my competitor to know what, I don't want an NGO to know what's in it. Right. You know, for us, transparency is a big, big part of the puzzle. We need to know where the problems reside so that we



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can fix them, right? And that means breaking down those information barriers within a product supply chain. But that can be really difficult when a company wants to say, you know, "this is my recipe. I don't want to share that information". But when we're talking about consumers' health, that information is crucial.

Yesh ([15:36](#)):

Boma, thanks to you and your team. We've already seen some progress in elimination of some of the chemicals in our consumer products, in our, in our food. Can you talk about some of those victories, the things that we're already realizing as consumers, without even knowing it.

Boma Brown-West ([15:51](#)):

So, you know, EDF has worked with Walmart for a long time on using its market power to create a more sustainable marketplace. In 2013, they released the first ever retailer chemicals policy where they focused on trying to, as they said, reduce, restrict and eliminate 10 high-priority chemicals from cleaning and beauty personal care products. And we worked with them on the development of that on their more ambitious commitment that they put out in 2017 on trying to reduce what's called a chemical footprint by 2022. And this was kind of a signal to the rest of the industry, and what we've seen over the course of the last few years is other retailers following along and putting out their own chemicals policies. We've seen commitments come from Walgreen's and Target and Amazon and so on.

Yesh ([16:51](#)):

Okay. And how do you feel when you walk down the aisle at your local drug store and you see products on the shelves that you had an influence on and you made safer?

Boma Brown-West ([17:00](#)):

Well, you know, it has been great to see this kind of sea change in this part of the store and these product categories, but then because I'm always seeing the next thing that can be improved, you know, my whole thing is we're trying to change the whole store, right? The whole marketplace. And so I'm always looking towards what are those other categories that we have to tackle too. And that's why the work that my team's been doing recently around the online marketplace is also exciting because there's a lot that can be done there too. A lot about speaking to consumers, being transparent about health and environmental impacts. And of course, companies making strong commitments around their product portfolios.



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Yesh ([17:51](#)):

So let's pivot a little bit to your personal journey. You began your career as an engineer, working in the R & D department of Whirlpool. How did you end up there? Were you always interested in science as a kid and taking things apart and putting them back together?

Boma Brown-West ([18:08](#)):

So, I loved math and science as a kid. Always did. So I always knew that I wanted to study something related to science when I went to college and I started out with physics and realized very quickly that that was too, um, theoretical. It was too theoretical for me. I needed something that was more hands on. Well, it was, it was, it was definitely hard and it was very abstract and I needed something that was more tangible. I had always liked trying to build things when I was growing up too, you know, build things around the house and things like that. So I went into mechanical engineering. And with that discipline, you get a little bit of everything. You got a little bit of like statics, a little bit of fluid mechanics, a little bit of material science, you get a whole breadth of things. And so after college, I thought it would be great to do a career in the consumer product space. And so that's, that's where I headed. And that's how I met up with Whirlpool, and started working in their R and D group working on next generation washers and dishwashers. You know, a lot of my projects were focused on ways to adapt the machine for water efficiency or energy efficiency. But at the end of the day, it's about trying to reduce the resource usage. And then when I went to grad school, I was able to work more in sustainable materials and focus a lot of tension on product recycling and on waste, which re-invigorated interest I had in that as a kid, this will date me a little bit, but I was a kid back when "Captain Planet" was first on TV and I loved Captain Planet. And it was also during the time period of everyone was caring about the ozone layer. I was very, very concerned about the ozone layer. And so I finally started putting two and two together between engineering mindset and working on environmental problems. And then little-by-little, I realized the space I wanted to be next was around the impact of chemicals on human beings on our health. And that's how I got to EDF.

Yesh ([20:27](#)):

What advice would you give to someone young, coming up in this work with passion for health?

Boma Brown-West ([20:35](#)):

I think I would say definitely build up your understanding in the field, but don't feel that because you're not a super expert in this, that you don't add value, that you don't have a perspective. That's helpful. I got into this through engineering. I didn't come into this through chemistry degree or a biology degree. I would also say find allies wherever you can and learn from them. There are some people I've worked with where, just being able to brainstorm with them and strategize with them, it helps me think better, and then it helps us work better. And the last thing I would say is communication is so key in this work of



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being able to interact and build relationships with people from different walks of life, in different companies and different units. And so it's critical to gain good verbal and writing skills.

Yesh ([21:36](#)):

I want to pull something out that you mentioned the strength and excitement in building a team with diverse perspectives. I heard you speak for a University of Michigan video about empowering people with the idea that their voice matters in the room and at the table. And I think you were talking to students of color in an academic or a professional setting. Can you speak to that a little bit further?

Boma Brown-West ([22:03](#)):

Sure. I was one of two women in my years, mechanical engineering class. It was a very small class. There were only two women and there were only two African-Americans. So I was one of both, you know, looking back that was definitely challenging at the time, I was pretty shy. And then when I first started working, I was a young woman working in a field that was heavily dominated by men, and mostly older white men, too. Those can appear as pretty daunting prospects, right? And so what I was trying to convey in that speech was finding your inner, I don't want to sound cheesy, but it's essentially you're-- you're I can't think of anything that I keep thinking of in our light. And I'm like, that's so cheesy.

Yesh ([22:59](#)):

No, that's right. It's a good visual.

Boma Brown-West ([23:02](#)):

Okay, fine. So we'll go with that. But basically you have to find in yourself that you belong in that room. You are talented enough to be in that space. You add something useful to the conversation and finding that kind of energy does not come overnight. That certainly didn't for me. But I think some of the things that helped me get there were: gaining experience, finding allies where I was too. You know, there were other female engineers, there were other black engineers and I got to know them. I got to learn from them. I got to commiserate with them. I got to draw energy from them. So that was very critical. Don't worry if you don't think you're a hundred percent perfect in something because no one is. And I think when you let go of that worry, that really helps you continue to achieve things.

Yesh ([24:01](#)):

Yes. It's uh, a combination of self-confidence and allies that can help you through the journey. And I actually have a related question that I ask all of my guests, as we wrap things up. If you could have a BOMA Brown West Board of Directors for yourself, and these are people that could be your biggest cheerleaders or your biggest critics, maybe there's someone in a role that you aspire to be in. Maybe you haven't met the people on your Board of Directors, but who are the people that you think about or



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go to when you're making life or work decisions to help inform and support that next step? Who would be on your board?

Boma Brown-West ([24:39](#)):

Oh man. Okay. This is, this is a tough one. I would say first and foremost, it would be one or both of my sisters. And honestly, the reason is they are good critics. They, I mean, it's, it's tough love, basically. They are good sources of tough love. And I think that I would definitely want them in my corner for life decisions. You know, they're my sisters.

Yesh ([25:03](#)):

That's what siblings do. Yeah. That's their job.

Boma Brown-West ([25:07](#)):

Yeah, exactly. And, um, hopefully my brother doesn't feel bad, but-- and then I would say that I would go for Oprah. She's talented, she's super successful. She also seems to just be very in tune spiritually and from her humble upbringing into where she has today. I just think that she would have great advice for career decisions.

Yesh ([25:33](#)):

Well, and fun fact: Oprah. And I actually went to the same high school. So, you know, we're, we're basically best friends. So yeah,

Boma Brown-West ([25:41](#)):

Basically, basically.

Yesh ([25:43](#)):

Just kidding. Great. Well, Boma, I want to thank you so much for being on the show today. Thank you for being on Degrees.

Boma Brown-West ([25:49](#)):

Thank you for having me on this, um, interview. It's been, it's been pretty interesting. Really good question. So thank you. Good conversation.

Yesh ([25:58](#)):

That's it for our conversation with Boma Brown-West director of consumer health and my colleague at EDF plus business, you can learn more about choosing clean products and fighting for beauty justice and



REAL TALK ABOUT
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WITH YESH PAVLIK SLENK



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