

# Inspiring Women

## Episode 36: Dr. Sabina Shaikh

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at [inspiringwomen.show](http://inspiringwomen.show) or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to this episode of Inspiring Women and I am very pleased this morning to be talking to Dr. Sabina Shaikh. She is University of Chicago's director of the program on global environment, and she's also a senior lecturer at the University of Chicago. She lectures on the environment, urban studies, geographical sciences. She is the faculty director of Chicago study. She co-leads the environmental frontiers initiative at the Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation. Now, her research focuses on the relationship of humans to environmental change related to health, livelihoods and migration. Sabina is on a variety of different boards, she's a thought leader. She has her PhD from UC Davis in agricultural economics. She has an economics degree from the University of Wisconsin and Dr. Shaikh, I'm really pleased to have you on Inspiring Women.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Thank you so much for having me, Laurie. I'm really excited to be here and I've been inspired by many women, so hopefully I can try to do the same myself.

Laurie McGraw:

I bet you can. I mean, you're in a really, really interesting field; the environment, global warming, change, what's happening there and how this connects to people's lives. So I'm really looking forward to this. But why don't we get started? Often, the way I start in Inspiring Women is just, why don't we start with what are you doing right now? What are you doing in your professional life? What are you focused on today?

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Well, today I'm grading. My students have been working this quarter on something called water stories, where they've investigated a water issue and have communicated it through data storytelling. I've given them the option to present it through a format of their choice. So I'm reading a very compelling set of research summaries, some creative writing, listening to a couple podcasts, looking at websites, all around water and water data. That's what I'm doing at the moment. I've also got a couple administrative tasks and then I'm finishing up a paper actually on

environmental connections to migration in Cambodia. That's on my plate all for Friday here today.

Laurie McGraw:

That's a big Friday. Maybe even give us a little bit of the career trajectory. Sabina, in terms of you started out with an economics degree and you do a lot of research. You're a thought leader in this area, in the environment. How did that happen? What sparked your interest and you took it to such a strong degree of study and the research that you do. Give us a bit of the background there.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah, sure. Well, I grew up with quite a bit of exposure to nature, but I didn't really think of it as something to study or that I could study until several years into college, probably. I was interested in people and behaviors. I was quite inclined towards the social sciences, which is not really the place you see as much environmental study, at least back then. I found economics as a social science really fit my quantitative leaning. And I found it a good place to study human behavior.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Then when I was in college, I was exposed to both agricultural and environmental economics and found that a really compelling place to study. To think about how people relate to their natural surroundings, how people influence environmental change and how they're affected by environmental change. Then when I much later came to Chicago, I was able to get involved with a lot of the environmental organizations here in Chicago. Chicago is a very environmental city. I mean, not just in its surroundings being next to the Great Lakes, but there's a strong environmental community here. So I was really able to get more involved in that local environmental community and to better understand how those types of stakeholders worked on advocating for environment. I can have applications of my research on very relevant topics in Chicago and beyond.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it also seems like the work that you do has a relationship to policy and the connection in terms of the urban environment with policy. Tell us a little bit more about that.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah, yeah. Within the urban environment, so much of the way we even just move around the city has to do with policy and planning and how cities came to be. Chicago was settled because of its proximity to water. So understanding how then policy influenced the way that we use water in Chicago and beyond is something that I think a lot about. We can also think about historical policy and how that influenced some urban conditions like segregation or inequality. If we can investigate how those different types of policies influenced conditions that exist today, we could think about how to use policy to undo certain conditions and advance certain other ones that create equitable urban environments.

Laurie McGraw:

I've read about you Sabina, that in talks that you've done, your parents came to the United States and became citizens back in the '70s, of the United States. You said that you grew up in nature, so you were always drawn there. Was this something that you knew you wanted to do early on? Today, we all know about climate change, but I don't know if we did back in the '80s and '90s as strongly as we do today.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah, I don't think so. I mean, I grew up in the suburbs, so it wasn't like grew up in the middle of nature. But we always had a yard to play in and there was a creek that ran through our yard. We could play down there and then my parents would take us camping or to the beach or up North, places like that. Then they were very big advocates for getting outside. I didn't really have a consciousness about it though until probably until I was in college even because I don't remember being very connected to any kind of environmental cause in high school, which is very different than a lot of my students who have embraced it much earlier. But I think it was in college that I got really exposed both personally, but also as something that I could study and research and work in as a career.

Laurie McGraw:

Then your research, you also mention something about migration. I don't really understand what you mean there. I understand what animal migration is, bird migration, but what does it mean from the environmental research that you're doing?

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Well, where I work my research is in Southeast Asia and Cambodia. In that part of the world, there's a lot of migration from agricultural areas to cities in a very different timescale than the United States. We've been looking at that type of migration and trying to identify how it's affected by environmental change. As people who live in areas that are dependent on the land for farming and for subsistence, what happens when water becomes less available, when soil becomes less productive? And how does that influence decisions to leave agriculture, leave their families in villages and go to the cities to work as urban laborers in construction and garment factories and other places that affect their household structure and their livelihoods? That's what I mean by migration. There's other people who study more specifically environmental migration, which would be all over the world, including the US, where they look at how people move from places, following hurricanes and other types of storms. But that's a little bit different than what I'm doing.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it sounds very interesting and I'm wondering, how did you pursue that? Oftentimes for women who are as accomplished as you are, there are either people like them who are doing similar things and they're following into that track, or they have somebody that's helping to push them there. Were you forging a new path, your own path, or were there others around you that you said, "Oh, gee, this is something that I want to follow because that's interesting. So-and-so that I know very well is doing it?"

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah, I don't think that I really came to it so much that way. I mean, my research team is all men actually except for me, but I came to this project through collaborative efforts where people I knew were already working in the area and they came to me and said that they were looking for some more environmental research and that's how I came to it. But I will say that I think that just more broadly speaking, my parents, they really embraced and believed in the American dream. I think given the part of the world that they're from Korea and Pakistan, I wanted to learn more about Asia and to study it more. Probably a little bit later, I did that.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

I think that they worked very hard to provide for us. I think especially for my dad coming from Pakistan, he was really committed to ensuring that my sister and I, and my mom too, were fully educated, informed, and independent in making our choices. I think that that in some ways really influenced my desire to study, to do research in Asia. A lot of my research, so much of it involves women and the decisions that women make, because most of the people that work in the city in garment factories are women who leave their villages and go work. Often leave their children and go work as well. It's all connected, it might not have been as intentional as it seems. I think that has influenced my research interests, for sure.

Laurie McGraw:

That intentionality wasn't there. It does seem very connected in terms of you laid it out ahead of time. As you think about the the study, obviously you're following very interesting topics that have a big impact on the environment, both here in Chicago, as well as across the globe. But do you think about your career progression in terms of what you pursue next or your next faculty appointment or what your research is going to be associated with? How do you think about that for yourself? Or is it more that you're just focused on what you're doing day to day and the next project emerges or institute that you need to be associated with comes across your plate?

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah, I think it's a combination of those things. Where I am today is not really what I had set out to do when I was in graduate school. I had different intentions there, but because circumstances and professional and personal reasons, I think my career has evolved more organically. That said, I do think that there's a combination of building of things and collaborations and partnerships to create that next project or that next initiative. Then there's other things that the opportunity is less cultivated. Something comes along and there's enough interest in it that we could take it and build it into what we want to see it become. I think that there's a lot of opportunity that's cultivated, but also there's always trying to build within certain constraints. But overall, I think I'm pretty fortunate not to face too much adversity along the way that others have.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

But I do think there's always some intentionality, but you can only stay on your path without getting bumped off of it for very long. And then you have to either take another path or try to get back to it. I think that's probably the case with most people, is that your intentions and where you end up are not that clear cut.

Laurie McGraw:

No, but you had support, you had family expectations to help guide you in choices that you've made. You mentor a lot of women, you have a number of students that you interact with. What advice do you give them as they plan for their, whether it's research journeys, career journeys? Do you suggest to them that they plan it out more specifically than perhaps you did? Or do you see these types of options becoming available to anyone? What would you suggest?

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah, yeah, this is a question I think about a lot now. I think when I was pretty young, growing up, I tried very hard not to stand out or draw attention to myself. I already felt different enough growing up in a place where very few people looked like me or were like me or like my parents. I think that I've had to really battle that later. And I still find myself doing that at times where I don't want to rock the boat and try to deal with it internally or deal with it in some other way. I think that's a very difficult place for women in particular and also in academic and other environments too, where some of the leadership tends to be concentrated among men.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

I think with my students, I just try to help them find their place and their voice, and really focus on what they want to do. I think for a lot of undergraduate students, that's one of the hard things is that our students are extremely motivated. They want to do everything and trying to figure out where you can channel your efforts so you don't burn out. College is hard enough as it is, so trying to do everything while you're taking your classes, while you're doing your research and whatever you have going on in your family life, college is not the end. So that you can focus on a few things and keep building and keep taking opportunities along the way. You don't have to try to do everything at one time.

Laurie McGraw:

How do you advise people to find their voice? The comment that you made about not wanting to rock the boat, that is a very, very typical thing for a woman. Doesn't want to rock the boat, draw attention to yourself. Yet that is an artificial barrier that women are putting in front of themselves. How do you push people to something that might be uncomfortable and allow them to do it in a way that is finding their own voice?

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah, I agree that it's somewhat of an artificial barrier. I think that sometimes we just find other ways to use our voice in order to be ultimately more productive, which is unfortunate. That's not the way it should be, but sometimes it's the way it has to be if we don't want to necessarily alienate ourselves. But I think that one thing that I think is really important and I would advise my students and I would advise my younger self to do, is find your community of people. There's certainly empowerment in talking to people who are facing the same kind of challenges as you are, and there's empowerment in finding people who together, you have a stronger voice, or you can give each other the confidence to use your voice.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

I mean, I've always had a great network of friends in high school and in college, but it was probably after college that I hadn't still really embraced or sought out my ethnic or my cultural

roots for wanting to fit into what seemed more American to me. I think that now I certainly try to do that. After college, I tried to do that and I appreciate that my daughter is already much more in tune and curious about her family and ancestors than I was. I think that forming your community really empowers you to use your voice and to feel confident in yourself.

Laurie McGraw:

That's great advice. I really like that and appreciate that, Sabina. I wanted to ask you about, we're coming, hopefully out of this pandemic, it's been an incredible year on every level actually. But you know so much about the environment, you know so much about how important it is for women in the research that you do, what are the connections with the environment that we should all be thinking about as we move back into focusing on our professional careers in a different way? And are there things about just the research that you do that you might advise people generally? Because I think we're all talking about mental health and additional levels of stress. I think a lot about women in terms of sometimes the lost year of women becoming further behind in aggregate in terms of professional development, I'm worried about that. So just your thoughts in that particular area.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah, yeah. I certainly have seen all of the reports and research about how many women dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic. So much of that is because of the lack of childcare or just having to navigate family and personal situations, taking care of elderly parents or others who have gotten sick. I think if we can really use that as evidence of how much we need to support women in their careers and if their career is in the office or if their career is at home taking care of their family, either way, we need to find better ways to support women.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

I think certainly thinking about childcare, thinking about mentorship and guidance and access to mental healthcare and things that are extremely important that we need to do at a societal level. In terms of our personal work, I think we all suffer a bit from not taking breaks and in many ways the remote environment has made that even harder because you're not separated between your work and home environment. At least for me, I feel like there's twice as many meetings because we don't have to try to get everyone in the same place at one time. But so I think we just have to personally really find the spaces in which we can step away even for a minute, even for a moment and try to do it in a way that doesn't sacrifice sleep, or sacrifice something else that makes you feel guilty because I think that's a big part of it. If I go off and do something by myself, I feel guilty for not doing something else. I think that's a real challenge that women face and a pressure that we put on ourselves.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Also, recognizing that some people just don't have the time to take these breaks because of work, because of childcare needs and others don't have access to the outdoors. There's a lot of advice where we tell people to get outside, get outdoors, I think that's even a slogan. But we sometimes over look that people don't have access to outdoors, or to safe spaces, or to clean air, clean water. Recognizing all of that as we come out of the pandemic, if we've learned anything from it, is just

trying to create more opportunities for people to have what others might have had access to during this pandemic time and others have not.

Laurie McGraw:

I think all of those comments and that advice is, first of all, I agree with it. I think that is fantastic. I'm curious Sabina, you are naturally giving that, you're giving that advice to your students as a leader who understands the connection of these different issues. You also said though, that you work with other faculty, mostly men. How do you advise them to give similar types of advice. Do they have the same level of awareness of the perhaps different pressures for women and do you feel that they are giving similar advice with the same level of passion perhaps that you are?

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

I think some do, but not all.

Laurie McGraw:

How do you help them? Do you encourage it? I mean, are you finding people are receptive to it and able to amplify it? Because I think it's important for beyond inspiring women like you, but others to emulate those same types of encouraging words of advice.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Yeah. Well, I think I could certainly do more too and I think about this often. I spend a lot of my time trying to build environmental initiatives at the university and I often think about, are there ways that I should be focusing my efforts on building initiatives that support female students and women and first-generation students? The university is doing a lot, but I'm not directly involved in a lot of those. A lot of mine comes from peer to peer mentoring or mentor to peer conversations. I often wonder if there's a way we can organize these efforts a little bit better.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

I think in some ways I find that creating this organized system also creates barriers for people who feel reluctant to join organizations or get involved. To the extent that we can do this individually, it's a much bigger proposition, but I think that we can reach people a little bit better and we can also reach the people that maybe don't seek out those types of organized initiatives or programs to participate in.

Laurie McGraw:

That's fantastic. Sabina, this has been such a great conversation. I really appreciate it. As we close out here, any last closing advice for other perhaps younger, inspiring and aspiring women that you might want to give?

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Sure, yeah. I mean, I think that one is to just take time for yourself, even if it's brief moments and also just find your own voice and find your own place. What inspires some women may not inspire others, or I've had people try to inspire other women by saying, "Oh, well, I've had three

kids and I've become the CEO of my company," and is that inspiring? It's absolutely inspiring to some people, but to others, it makes them feel even more challenged. So I would say to think about the inspiration of what it is that you need and what it is that you want to accomplish and to seek out people who can help guide you with that.

Laurie McGraw:

Fantastic. This has been an excellent Inspiring Women conversation with Dr. Sabina Shaikh and thank you so much.

Dr. Sabina Shaikh:

Thank you, my pleasure.

Laurie McGraw:

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