

# Future of the Business World: Moniola Odunsi Fights for Racial Justice

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*Moniola Odunsi, 16, is a junior at The Madeira School just outside of Washington, D.C. She and her teammates, Sora Shira, a 13-year-old innovator from New Hampshire, and Sualeha Irshad, a 16-year-old innovator from Texas, recently won first place in the [Moody's Foundation Peace and Justice Challenge](#), a part of the [Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship World Series of Innovation](#), which challenges students to solve the world's problems. Their project, *Equally*, is a software platform that uses artificial intelligence and natural language processing to identify implicit bias.*

*On this episode of Future of the Business World, Moniola discusses the software platform she and her teammates are developing, as well as her passion for racial justice issues and her belief that "passive activism is not going to produce change."*



**Wharton Global Youth Program:** Hello Everyone and Welcome to *Future of the Business World*, the podcast featuring teen entrepreneurs and innovators from across the globe.

I'm Diana Drake with the [Wharton Global Youth Program](#) at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. At Wharton Global Youth, we introduce business and finance education to high school students in ways that provoke curiosity and thoughtfulness—and help empower the next generation of business leaders.

Our guests on FBW [and in our [online course](#) of the same name] are aspiring leaders and innovators. They've thought deeply about the problems facing our planet and are working toward finding solutions.

Today's focus is racial injustice, an issue that has quite literally spilled out onto the streets in the U.S. this past year following the death of George Floyd and repeated violence against people of color. The fight for justice and equality is also strong in the business world with the spotlight on diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace.

Moniola Odunsi, a high school student in Virginia, is part of a team that recently took first place in the Moody's Foundation Peace and Justice Challenge, a part of the NFTE World Series of Innovation. The team's winning idea, *Equally*, identifies implicit bias in text and promotes progress toward equal justice.

Moniola, welcome to Future of the Business World!

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**Moniola Odunsi:** Hi everyone. Thank you so much, Diana, for having me on the podcast. I'm so honored to be here to talk about myself; Equally, which I developed with my teammates Sora Shira, a 13-year-old innovator from New Hampshire, and Sualeha Irshad, a 16-year-old innovator from Texas; and talk more about peace and justice as a whole. Thanks so much for having me.

**Wharton Global Youth:** We're off to a great start. First, tell me a little more about yourself.

**Moniola:** As you all now know my name is Moniola Odunsi and I'm a 16-year-old innovator from Maryland. I go to school in Virginia. And I'm passionate about changing the world. From a young age, I've always been drawn to the business and innovation field. While my friends were watching Disney Channel, I was a kid watching *Shark Tank* with my dad. I actually love the autonomy of the business field and that you are your own boss and you get to make your own decisions. Even more than that, you can create long-lasting change in the business field. It can be immediate change or it can be change that happens in five or 10 years, but you can have such a big impact on other people's lives with your own creativity and your own mind. I've always loved that aspect of the business field and I still love that aspect, which is why I desire to be in it today.

**Wharton Global Youth:** What drew you to innovate around peace and justice? Were you already tuned into this idea of building societies that provide equal justice for all?

**Moniola:** This is a really great question without a simple answer. I don't think there is one specific moment or one specific thing that led me to innovate around peace and justice. As a young Black woman in the United States, I've always had to think about peace and justice issues that concern me and those who look like me. It really just comes with being Black in the United States. Never really feeling safe in a society where you're supposed to have your rights and feel secure. It's the feeling of fear every time you see blinking red and blue lights behind you while you drive. A lot of people think that this affects you when you're grown, when you're an adult. I remember being in kindergarten and we had gotten donuts to bring to my school for my birthday. We were driving and my dad gets pulled over. I remember feeling such panic. I thought the immediate worst. I was so scared, and I was only in kindergarten! But I had saw this so many times on the news and it just scared me. It's the same reality for so many Black Americans every single day, millions in our country. We quite literally fear the people who are supposed to keep us safe.

After seeing the racial violence against the Black community, Asian community and just minorities as a whole become so indisputably apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, my desire to affect change in this area exponentially increased. Seeing stories about George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and so many more alike who died simply because they were racially profiled as a threat before they even posed one really spoke to me as a reality that I don't want to see in the future and I don't want future generations to have to live with.



Moniola Odunsi

**Wharton Global Youth:** I can definitely feel and hear your passion for this issue. I think before we talk about your venture, I want to understand a bit of context. What is implicit bias and what is its influence on issues of equality and social justice?

**Moniola:** Implicit bias is a tendency to associate a specific race or people of that race with stereotypes, but you do it subconsciously. It's important to note that I have implicit bias, you have implicit bias, we are all affected by implicit bias in some form or another because of the society we have been bred in. It's not something we can run away from. Ideally, it wouldn't be in our society, but it's such a systemic issue that has been rooted in centuries of racism in our country that still has massive effects today.

As an example, a study that influenced the building of Equally was the Implicit Association Test done in 1998. It showed that 68% of people were able to associate White faces with good words faster than they did Black faces. And that's just one of many examples. Another example that is seen so frequently is when people see a Black person walking on the sidewalk toward them and then they go across the street because they think they are going to pose some sort of threat to them before they even engage. Those are just two examples that show what implicit bias is.

Implicit bias has such a fundamental effect on equality and justice because society can say we want to have an equal society or we vie for equality, but actions speak so much louder than words in this case and other cases. If we just take the recent killing of Dante Wright by Kim Potter. This is an officer who had decades of experience in her role. She had served for so many years. But just seeing this 20-year-old Black man who is just out of teenagehood, who is a forming adult. She saw him and immediately believed that he was a threat because of his skin color, I believe before she even engaged with him. Her implicit bias and racial profiling of him and people who look like him ended up in his death. For many, implicit bias is the difference between life and death and has such a massive effect.

“That step from passive activism to actively advocating and standing with these minority populations is something that my generation still needs to understand.” — Moniola Odunsi, Co-founder, Equally

**Wharton Global Youth:** Your team's software platform, Equally, identifies implicit bias in text. Can you tell us the mechanics of how it works?

**Moniola:** Equally is a software designed to check improper bias language in people's writing. It would begin by asking

the user to identify the race of their audience. Just using the options common on U.S. forms, it would ask for White, Black or African American; American-Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; Multi-racial or Unknown if you don't know the race. Then, using the Google Cloud natural language API, Equally would perform sentiment analysis to identify the text's overall attitude on a numerical scale from 1, which would be very negative, to 10, which would be very positive. This just references the fact that, as the Implicit Association Test showed, that people are faster and more likely to associate White faces with good words and Black faces and other minorities with negative words. As more data is collected, Equally will analyze the central tendency of this numerical value for each racial group. So this is really just to avoid any flukes. You can be writing an angry email to someone regardless of their race, but if it becomes a trend and across multiple people who are of that race, it's more likely that it is a bigger issue, which my team has identified as implicit bias. So, if Equally notices that this central tendency is lower for a particular race, the next time the user writes to someone of that race and uses a negative word, Equally will recommend a more positive word for you to use. This addresses the accountability aspect. A lot of people fail to recognize that they do have implicit bias and they fail to recognize who they are most implicitly biased towards, and there are ways to help combat this.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Have you tested this with actual person-to-person messaging? What have you learned about the prevalence of implicit bias? I think you're right that most of us have implicit bias. I'm curious what your results were when you pulled out the data?

**Moniola:** Unfortunately, we have not been able to test this right now. Equally is still in the development phase, so we are still doing a lot of research and we're hoping to test this on a large group of people shortly. There are so many studies that show the prevalence of implicit bias; however, we definitely want to do our own study. That is definitely in the planning phase. All I can tell you is that we are all affected by implicit bias in some way.

**Wharton Global Youth:** You mentioned that you still have work to be done in terms of developing this out and testing it. What about the machine learning involved? Do you hope to make progress with the actual technology?

**Moniola:** Sora, Sualeha and I are definitely excited to continue this project. We really believe in the mission. Right now we're doing a lot of research into the sentiment analysis and Google Cloud and the technical aspect of it all. We have reached out to so many different professors and people of experience and we have started to look at the code. There are various YouTube videos and resources on the sentiment analysis aspect of it to become more well-versed in it. We have also reached out to someone at Grammarly, [an app that helps people improve the use of words, grammar, spelling and more in their writing]. That platform was a big inspiration for Equally – you get the name [similarity]. We're definitely doing a lot more research into the machine learning aspect of it because that will be a big part. In the next few months we hope to acquire datasets and learn more about those and the overall technical side as a whole.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Do you believe you can have a lasting impact on racial injustice?

**Moniola:** This was a question that our whole team talked about when developing the idea. How big of an impact can Equally have? Implicit bias is such a systemic issue that it's hard to say. Obviously, racism is not going to be solved by Equally. But I think one thing that Equally does address is, again, the accountability aspect and the identification aspect that is part of the longer journey of combating racism. It may not solve implicit bias right away, because it is a systemic issue, but it allows people to recognize and understand their implicit bias, which is the first step in the longer journey of achieving equality.

**Wharton Global Youth:** You are passionate about the business world, even beyond entrepreneurship. Where do you see the intersection of your business interests and social justice? How will you make meaningful change in this area as a business leader and do you hope you will?

**Moniola:** Much of my business interests go hand-in-hand with social justice, just because the lack of social justice is an issue that weighs heavily on my mind daily. And business, the innovation aspect, is quite literally about solving issues. But I think along with business positively affecting social justice, I think there's as much work to be done and for equality to become more apparent in the business field. If you take a look at the top executive business leaders or business titans, as you may call them, you'll quickly notice that most are White men. I, obviously, am not a White man. So past just the work I aspire to achieve in the business field, I believe that by simply being in the field and setting my goals and hopes so high, and these are goals that I believe I am going to achieve, I'm helping to continue a precedent that Black women can be just as and even more successful than their White male counterparts in the field.

**Wharton Global Youth:** You've said that Generation Z is committed to this idea of inclusion—not a world that does not see color, but rather one that appreciates color. Are you seeing progress, and what more would you hope that your peers do to influence change?

**Moniola:** First of all, I'm so glad you said inclusion is not a world that does not see color but one that appreciates it because I think that's something that a lot of people don't understand. So, thank you for saying that. To answer your question, I definitely have hope in my generation. I know I've talked a lot about the work that needs to be done, but seeing amount of movements and ideas that have been started by Gen Z that have arisen to advance the goal of equality, even just in the past year, and how much impact they have been able to have. I think a common misperception is that change happens when you're a certain age, typically an adult age. I completely disagree with this. I sincerely believe that my generation has debunked this theory. I think my generation wants to see and live in a future in which equality is not just an ideal, but an actual reality. A lot of people say we are the future changemakers and the future leaders. I would say that we can [be] and are those people right now.

At the same time, I'm not saying Gen Z is perfect. There is a lot of work that still needs to be done. A lot of that comes with the day and age of social media and how much our generation has been influenced by such. Trends are cool and trends are fun, but people's lives still continue past just Instagram trends. A good example of this is when George Floyd was murdered back in March [2020] and we saw a flood of Instagram stories saying, 'I stand with the Black community.' They posted black screens on Instagram to say that they stand with the Black community. This is amazing, right. But I think what my generation needs to become aware of is that passive activism is not going to produce change. Instagram trends are good, but you have to put in active steps to see that change become a reality. That step from passive activism to actively advocating and standing with these minority populations is something that my generation still needs to understand.

**Wharton Global Youth:** In what ways would you recommend that they actively stand with them?

**Moniola:** Activism can be big or it can be small. It can be simply in your household if someone says something that is racist or that you know is fundamentally wrong, correcting them. You don't have to post it online. A million people don't have to see it. But maybe that simple action starts a chain reaction where they go to another person and say, 'Well, this is not right for this or that reason.' Or, it can be larger where you start your own movement and you continue to post resources online, but you donate to these causes. You're not just posting links online and saying, Go, donate! And not doing anything behind the camera. You're actually doing these things. It's also just continuing the conversation past the trend. People don't stop being Black after the news coverage stops covering the movement. They continue. It's that consistency and wanting to actually do more is more than enough.

**Wharton Global Youth:** One question I like to ask all of the entrepreneurs we interview on *Future of the Business World* is if you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?

**Moniola:** This is such a hard question. I remember getting asked this as a child and I didn't know what to say. If I could change one thing in the world, it would probably be people's open-mindedness and ability to have empathy for others. I

think this is something that is missing from our world right now. If everyone had this, I sincerely believe that so many of the issues that populate the world would be solved. Ignorance is a choice in a lot of situations, and I think a lot of people have chosen that. Being able to say that everyone is open-minded and has this empathy for others would eradicate so many of the issues we see right now.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Let's wrap up with our lightning round. Please answer these questions as quickly as you can.

What is a technology that blows your mind?

**Moniola:** CO2-absorbing fabrics. It basically means you are a walking plant.

**Wharton Global Youth:** In only a few words, what does business leadership mean to you?

**Moniola:** Inspiring others to be their best self.

**Wharton Global Youth:** One goal, big or small, that you have set for yourself in the next year?

**Moniola:** Definitely being intentional about spending time with my friends and family before I head off to college.

**Wharton Global Youth:** If you could work for any company in the world, which would you choose?

**Moniola:** This is so hard, there's so many. If I had to choose, I'm going to say two: Google or Facebook.

**Wharton Global Youth:** What show would we catch you binge-watching at midnight?

**Moniola:** *Ginny and Georgia*. Amazing show.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Which business person would you most like to take to lunch?

**Moniola:** Sheryl Sandberg [Chief Operating Officer of Facebook]. I think she speaks for herself. She's such a boss lady and such an inspiration for me in how she has been able to break so many glass ceilings and barriers that society has put in front of her. She's such an inspiration for me.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Moniola, it has been a pleasure speaking with you. Thank you for joining us on Future of the Business World.

**Moniola:** Thank you so much, Diana, I really appreciate it. And, bye everyone!