IDEAS AT FORD WITH CHARLES BLOW

A New Model for Fashion with Sinéad Burke, Lindsay Peoples, and Sara Ziff

Tilting the Lens founder and CEO Sinéad Burke, The Cut's editor-in-chief and Black in Fashion Council co-founder, Lindsay Peoples, and Model Alliance founder and executive director Sara Ziff join host Charles Blow to talk about how they are working to create systemic change within the fashion industry and what they're doing to make fashion a more equitable and accessible field.

ANNOUNCER: Please welcome to the stage, Charles Blow.

[applause]

[Charles Blow, a Black man with a gray beard wearing a black suit, Host]

CHARLES BLOW: Welcome to Ideas at Ford, where we bring together some of the world's best thinkers and activists to talk about some of the world's biggest problems. Tonight we are tackling fairness and work safety and inclusion and accessibility in the world of fashion. Joining me are Lindsay Peoples, editor-in-chief of The Cut and co-founder of the Black in Fashion Council.
Also, Sinéad Burke, founder and CEO of Tilting the Lens. And last, Sara Ziff, founder and executive director of the Model Alliance. Thank you. Thank you all for joining. All right, Sinéad I'm going to start with you. So in 2017, you gave a TED talk that was wildly popular. It was called "Why Design Should Include Everyone." But then, at the Business and Fashion Voices conference in 2021, you said, like, you reconsider some of the things you said because it wasn't enough. It didn't go far enough. How are you now thinking about accessibility, particularly in the world of fashion?

[Sinéad Burke, a white cisgender woman who identifies as queer and physically disabled and has dwarfism with brown shoulder length hair wearing a full length long sleeved white silk dress with gold detail, founder and CEO, Tilting the Lens]

SINÉAD BURKE: I did that Ted Talk in 2017, as you said, here in New York. If I'm being very honest, the conversation was rooted in my lived experience as a disabled queer woman. I have dwarfism. It's been very much part of my own knowledge since the earliest of age, that I lived in a world that wasn't designed for me, and that my disability came about because of that friction between my physiology and the way in which design is built, and the world is designed for so few. I think if you'd asked me at 2017, I felt truly confident that I had the answer, but I didn't. I had questions. I had my own lived experiences, whether it was going through an airport, whether it was looking at retail design, whether it was going and ordering a coffee, and the idea

that the pastry counter was so high that nobody could see me, and the baristas getting frustrated because they keep saying, next, please. And the person behind me is trying to identify that I'm in the queue. But in terms of the work that I'm doing now, and to your point, that evolution: Lived experience is so important. But as we think about not just the “why,” we have to think about the “how.” So for me, when we think about accessibility, one of the great challenges that we have when we think about access is often through a lens of compliance.

I turned 35 in September. I tell you that only because I'm the same age as the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was always created to be a baseline standard. And the idea was that over time, we would iterate and continuously extend the notion of what accessibility is. And in many ways, that benchmark legislation informs so many other pieces of legislation, whether it's the Disability Discrimination Act in the UK or the Equality Act in Ireland, where I'm from. But the reality is, we allowed compliance to be the ceiling, and it continues to exclude so many people. So when we think about accessibility is about explicitly designing solutions with marginalized communities to ensure that innovation can come about. It's about prioritizing form and function, and it's about ensuring that the methodology is co-designed with the people with lived experience, not just guiding the design process, but leading it. And the reality is, there's no such thing as fully accessible. If the world was designed for me, it would be accessible for me, but inaccessible to about 97% of you all. But how can we create flexibility within the design process? How can we create multimodal solutions where people can adapt to what it is that they need that day? Because when we think about disability and access, for many people, it's something you move in and out of in your life. So design needs to be flexible and informed and customizable.

CHARLES BLOW: You talk about people needing to view people with disabilities as colleagues and not customers. What do you mean by that?

SINÉAD BURKE: When we think about design solutions and when we think about what system change looks like, you know, fashion's response to disability has been about creating capsule collections that are adaptive in a limited range and in the limited size of colors that are so dependable on the market being ready and there being a business case to be able to identify. In some parts of the world, 75% of disabled women are unemployed. So if we only ever think about the business case and the opportunity and capitalism is a system that we are all working within, but if we're not simultaneously creating pipelines of talent where meaningful opportunities exist, and creating the conditions for disabled people to thrive, we only ever see disabled people as objects to exploit and the opportunity to create sales. Whereas actually, if we think of disabled people as innovators by design and leaders by nature, there is an opportunity, I think, to create wider system change. So it can't just be customers, it has to be colleagues. There's an ease at which if we think about disabled people as customers, but we never value them as part of the whole holistic system.

CHARLES BLOW: Sara, you founded the Model Alliance, talk to us about your work to build a more equitable, safe environment for models in an industry that is exclusionary by its very nature. That is, on some level, maybe, kind of has some exploitation built into it.

[Sara Ziff, a 45 year-old white woman with should length light brown hair wearing an emerald green suit and black top, founder and executive director, Model Alliance]

SARA ZIFF: Sure. Well, first, thank you for having me. I'm really honored to be here alongside both of you. I founded the Model Alliance because I myself worked as a model for many years. And I was one of the lucky ones. I worked as a face of big brands. And I was relatively privileged compared to many of my peers who were immigrants, who, you know, English was not their first language. They were sending money back home to their families. But I also experienced the pitfalls of working in a largely unregulated industry. So I was regularly put in compromising situations. At 14, I was put on the spot to pose nude. I often had difficulty just getting paid the money that I was owed. When I was 19, I was raped. And I was sort of lured into a hotel room under the guise of a professional opportunity. And so many of the many of the sort of villains who the Me Too movement unmasked, whether it was Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, Bill Cosby, the list goes on. They were all preying on young women who worked or aspired to work in this industry. And that's not a coincidence. And this is not how a $2 trillion industry that's built on the backs of mostly young women and girls should operate. Models are workers who are deserving of the same rights and protections as anyone else who works for a living. So for me, this is, you know, personal and really comes out of my own experiences.

CHARLES BLOW: Lindsay, you know, you have a big journalism job.

LINDSAY PEOPLES: I've heard.

CHARLES BLOW: But you, but you also are, co-founder of the Black and Fashion Council. Talk to us about what the council does. And also how you balance your journalistic life with your advocacy and activism.

[Lindsay Peoples, a brown woman with brown eyes wearing a dark chocolate brown dress, editor-in-chief, The Cut and Co-Founder, Black in Fashion Council]

LINDSAY PEOPLES: I mean, it's interesting to me only because I never really saw it as a choice, but I think that's also because I've never seen myself as, really the perfect person to work in fashion. I never had the connections. I remember just being really, just, like, almost resentful about the fact that because I didn't have these things and because I didn't have wealth and all those things that, like, how was I ever going to make this change that I really felt passionate about. I knew that, you know, if I could do something, I always would do it. No matter what I was going to do in fashion.

For me, it was never the, you know, you get power and then you've changed. I mean, this is you get power and this is who you've always been, and it just amplifies what you've always really wanted to do or who you are. Who you've always been and at the core of my identity, it always has been. How can I be a ladder to help other people up? And how can I be a ladder to help women of color and people of color in general, just inclusive, being inclusive overall. And so

when I was at *New York Magazine*, the first time as an editor, I wrote a piece about what it's like to be Black and in fashion, and I just stayed in contact with everyone. And during pandemic, there were a lot of conversations around, okay, so like, what can we do? How can we rally together, etc. And so I was, I mean, I'm happy to always use my connections and help. And if I can call someone and say, “Hey, do you know this buyer, this place, this Black designer needs help, etc.”

So we've done around ten, this past February was our 10th season and we just have a showroom. We had it at Spring Studios and we moved to WSA, to do a free showroom for Black designers and we help them get press and help them meet with buyers and connect to them with, you know, different production companies, etc. and just kind of try to give them the support that they need and the mentorship and guidance. And then we do a lot of just connecting of, you know, like Barbie came to us and said, “Hey, like we are looking to find some new designers for clothes.” I'm like, “Great, I know many designers, I know many creatives.” And yeah, I don't take a salary for it. I do this because I think it's important.

CHARLES BLOW: Fashion is global, right? So you have people working in all different countries, in the U.S. working in different states, cities. How do you, in this global fashion world, tackle the ideas of equity and try to make inclusion and access real for more people? Do you start at the bottom locally, in the states or a country, or do you try to craft some global set of standards, or at least aspirations that we should be working forward across all of fashion, no matter where it is?

SARA ZIFF: Yeah, well, we have a broad vision for labor solidarity. I think, you know, the fashion industry has always kind of been a backwater for workers rights and been camouflaged by this glamorous facade. But, you know, the creative side of the industry has really just started to organize. But for centuries, you know, garment workers have toiled away in, in obscurity. And in some ways, we sort of face a complementary crisis of recognition. You have, you know, models who are highly visible, but their work is not sort of culturally recognized as work. And their concerns are kind of treated as frivolous. And then on the other side of the industry, you have, you know, people who are literally sometimes risking their lives in unsafe factories. And, even though we're working under different socioeconomic conditions, it's an industry that's mostly built on the backs of women and girls who—on both sides of the industry—are trying to have a voice in their work.

CHARLES BLOW: But one of the ways you've attacked is at the state level. I don't want to say first, but at the start, at state level, with one piece of legislation, which is the Fashion Workers Act, which has been passed and signed and this year in New York State goes into effect. When?

SARA ZIFF: June. It took three years of campaigning to get to this point. And it, you know, for the first time gives basic rights and protections to our workforce. We get to see our own contracts with our clients, which we previously weren't privy to. We will have protections against harassment, discrimination, unsafe working conditions, like a safe place to go to report our

concerns. And we've run for years, over a decade now, the industry's support line, where we've heard from thousands of people, about a range of issues, nonpayment, sexual abuse, and it's felt honestly like putting a Band-Aid on a big gaping wound because, the law has not been on our side. And so now, for the first time, when people contact us, we'll be able to say, “Yes, you do have rights. And here's how to, you know, how to move forward.”

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: Anybody want to chime in on that before we go move on?

LINDSAY PEOPLES: I remember, starting out, in just interning at different places in fashion and people would say like, “Oh, this person isn’t on brand.” And I'd be like, “What does that mean? Who is on brand? How did we get there? Like, who's who is, who is the person that is on brand?” And so much of the work that we do at *The Cut* really starts with a question and a curiosity. It isn't this definitive statement, and it isn't trying to be aspirational. It really is about being approachable. And so I think that does lend itself to being a lot more diverse, in the way that you discuss things in the way that you want to develop an audience and just develop a relationship with people. So that's what.

CHARLES BLOW: I'll stay on there for one second, you know, what do you think the media's responsibility is in creating a more equitable, accessible fashion world?

LINDSAY PEOPLES: I mean, it's huge, but it's one that people are very fearful around because it usually—it is very alienating. I think, any time that we've done a piece that, you know, I'm aware, is going to shake the table a little bit, people get very nervous. They're like, well, “This photographer isn't going to work with me, or this person isn't going to want to hire me,” or “How will I do this?” Because so much of it is, especially in, I think, fashion and media. I would say a lot of the hiring is subjective, like people, yes, post roles, but it is often like, you know this writer from this place or you've worked with this model in this thing. So I do think that people are often very fearful of closed doors. And it just—it is a responsibility, but there are only a few.

SINÉAD BURKE: But one of the other things, to your point about media, I had the great privilege in 2019 to be on the cover of British *Vogue* and was the first little person to ever do so.

CHARLES BLOW: Can we?

[applause]

SINÉAD BURKE: She has a Guinness World Record. She does. But I'll be very transparent. It was a really challenging set. There was no consideration for my access needs in advance, and I don't think it was malicious. Just nobody thought of it. They knew that I was disabled. They knew that I was a little person, but hadn't joined the dots. And to be very fair, I was afraid to say anything because I felt that I could or would be replaced. And I left that set that day thinking one of two things: One, it cannot exist that in terms of 2019, I am white, I am cisgendered. That is a

huge amount of privilege for us to be celebrating that as a milestone. So how do we create broader intersectional change? And two: One is not enough. How do we think about accessibility in its broadest possible form? So in May 2023, my company, Tilting the Lens, guest-edited British *Vogue*'s “Reframing Fashion” issue. But one of the earliest challenges that we had was where are we going to shoot the issue? We had this big ambition that we would have, you know, five disabled people on covers, 19 disabled people inside, all of the articles written by disabled journalists.

But even when we began to think about the types of talent that we wanted as part of the issue, we immediately had to think about the accessibility on set. We reviewed every single set within the London infrastructure that could be used for a fashion shoot of that nature. Two of them fit our criteria for accessibility, and of those two, both of them were booked. We had to negotiate with the people who already had those bookings, who didn't have the access needs for us to be able to prioritize it.

So when we think about the responsibility of media, I think there's an ease at which we say it is their responsibility and in turn, their fault, without acknowledging so many of the systemic barriers that exist. And even if I think about when we did “Reframing Fashion,” I really wanted the issue to be made available in Braille. The editors at the time said, “Does anybody blind read Vogue?” And I said, “I don't know. Shall we find out?” And Condé Nast as a publisher, didn't have the infrastructure to create materials in Braille. It's actually very difficult. So we partnered with the Royal National Institute of the Blind and made the issue available in Braille. And every issue continues to be made available in Braille.

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: Lindsay, when we say the fashion industry, we think two categories: Designer. Model. Right? There's a whole army of people that are the fashion industry, including the people who cover the fashion. How do we reframe this so that people see more of the unseen people in fashion. And we're able to advocate for those people as well as the people that people see.

LINDSAY PEOPLES: Yeah. I mean, I think it's twofold. We do a job fair for Black and Fashion Council every August to try to expose young people of color to all the different opportunities. And I think, the exposure at a really young age is, is just something that most people of color aren't allowed that privilege. Like you just you're, to be able to know someone at this company or to be able to see this certain job. I think a lot of times there is just a lack of intention in the industry as far as the ways in which that we want to gatekeep. And that exclusivity is something that people really thrive on. And so it's done on purpose. I want to make that clear. It's not something that is on accident or just keeps happening. But I do think a lot of the work for all of us is really that we try to help kind of expose what are the opportunities for more people to come in the industry, but then also, exposing people who, where like they're doing amazing work.

And I think, for me, it's always that, you know, obviously in running a business, you look at—I look at traffic, I look at SEO—all of those things. Right. But there are some things that I will do, and I know people aren't going to read it. And easiest example, we write about abortion every single day. And I know people aren't going to read it every single day. I know it because they're like, “There's all these other things going on, you guys, what about you?” I see the comments. But it is important to me, and, you know, we have a directory where you can type in your ZIP code and find your nearest abortion clinic. We did a whole issue on it many times, and I think that there—it's balancing that because for me, it's like, I know that that's not going to get a ton of traffic. People may not read it, but it's really important resource for those who can have it. And especially the ones that are resources and where to get, they are not behind a paywall specifically so that I want people to subscribe or not. Like, I want you to be able to find help and support here. But I think it's,it's that kind of intentionality that has to kind of meet with, with a lot of the infrastructures that are in place to kind of gatekeep certain things that are already in place.

CHARLES BLOW: Sinéad, you founded Tilting the Lens. Tell us about Tilting the Lens.

SINÉAD BURKE: Sitting at home in Ireland in my parents’ spare room, I had a great idea. I'm going to start a business. I went to Cambridge Judge Business School and did a short term course and learned how business systems worked. It was very deliberately a business, and the reason why is because disability has been conflated with charity for too long. And while there are essential nonprofits that are doing really excellent work, they are reliant often on federal funding. Or also, it creates a mindset within society that disabled people are in need of charity and in turn only deserve charity.

When I think about the work that we do, so often in the early days of the business, people assumed we were a charity. They directed us to the ESG departments or to the foundations, which was lovely, but not necessary. I could take money from every department. And what I wanted to build with the mission of creating the conditions for disabled people to be successful was firstly, to create the environment entirely where we could hire disabled people globally and they could be successful. I started working in the fashion industry with the business. We worked with a number of global luxury brands to support them at the most senior leadership level, to implement what strategic change looks like in accessibility. So maybe to give you some examples, we worked with Gucci to support the employment of disabled people in luxury retail. One of the first things that we did was create a program where we hired deaf people as client advisers.Immediately the question I got was around headcount and around, “What does this mean as a cost to the business?” The individuals had full time British Sign Language interpreters with them in store to be able to support. In terms of the service, those client advisers were the highest selling client advisers in store. Now, I say that and I deliberately create the caveat to say disabled people do not have to be the highest selling client advisers in the store in order to be employed, in order to be part of the team.

And we have those who are exceptional at their job in every category of community and lived experience. But what it created was a market for different kinds of people to come to that store

and for the first time, be able to communicate in their language with dignity, and with creativity as part of that concept. So one of my colleagues, Orla McCann, who is here tonight—is our expert in the built environment. We're currently developing an office in London that is hopefully going to change the way we think about accessibility within that environment.

There is and we were talking about this earlier, this great demand for everybody to return to the office, even though offices are not designed for people to be successful in so many ways. My big win in that office is that one of the things that we heard from the research that we did around disabled employees, is that what they wanted was automatic doors. Now, automatic doors is a very serious issue. It's a serious issue because it's not very sustainable, because if automatic doors are automatic, they open and they close and they allow wind and air through. Not very sustainable. The other deep challenge with automatic doors? They're ugly. The button to press them, the way they move. But that's a supply chain issue because when we design anything to be accessible, we design it to be ugly.

We design it through a lens of medical model because we design for disabled people, not with them. Next time, step inside an accessible bathroom, it is designed with very little aesthetic and beauty in mind. That is the limitation of universal design as a framework. There's seven principles, not one of them around aesthetics. So our work is about, how do we bring form and function together, how do we bring accessibility and sustainability together.

You know how we got our automatic doors? Because we spoke to non-disabled people who do hot desking in that office and said that in central London they leave their bike downstairs, they have their helmet, they have their laptop, they have their cup of coffee, and guess what? They got no more limbs to open the door. We got our automatic doors, and I would love to sit here and say that it is enough when disabled people tell you that this is what they need, that the system changes, that is not yet the reality. So how do we make access by design as a universal opportunity, and think about the way in which it creates less friction in everybody's lives. But we do work small-scale, large-scale, conditions for disabled people to thrive.

CHARLES BLOW: Sara, the Model Alliance played a critical role in the passage of the 2022 Adult Survivors Act, which let survivors of sexual assault file lawsuits past the statute of limitations. And we saw a flood of lawsuits. How has that helped or impacted models in the fashion industry?

SARA ZIFF: Yeah, well, I think our work on the Adult Survivors Act is a good example of how, by focusing on the concerns of our immediate community, we've actually been able to have a far reaching impact. So, you know, for me, myself as a survivor, it was incredibly important to be able to pursue justice, even though I was time barred. And we created this one year look back window to be able to file a civil lawsuit. A more sort of recent issue that we've been focused on that similarly, impacts our immediate community, but has far reaching implications is, the emergence of generative AI, to create imagery. And this is not something that just impacts models. But, you know, the whole creative team, you know, when your body is your business, having your image manipulated or used without your consent is a violation of your rights. But

we've been hearing from photographers, makeup artists, hairstylists and so on, who are really concerned about this kind of wonderful, creative, communal experience being threatened and people being replaced. And so, you know, the Fashion Workers Act is significant in part because it's one of the first laws in the world that seeks to address the misuse of generative AI. And it's certainly not a silver bullet. It's just a first step. But this is something that I think is going to be more and more important as we look ahead to the future legislation.

CHARLES BLOW: Lindsay, you kind of burst my bubble in the, greenroom because I thought that, we were seeing more Black people in the fashion industry, more Black designers, that they were doing better. And you said the—act—the opposite is true.

LINDSAY PEOPLES: Correct.

CHARLES BLOW: Talk to us about the lay of the land for other people who might look at the fashion world. And we think we're seeing more representation. We think we are seeing more opportunities for people of color. But what is the reality of what's happening?

LINDSAY PEOPLES: Yeah, I mean, I think it's always been this disconnect of how, you know, I think so much of what Sarah's saying on that side is, is true on editorial as well. And working at magazines, it looks like you can see a lot of, I remember especially like during pandemic, there was a lot of publications talking about, you know, we put X amount of models on this cover, etc., the amount of, you know, just inclusivity is just incredibly gone down on magazine covers. I—when you look at the runway, there's not size inclusivity, inclusivity at all anymore. People completely forgot that they got on that train three years ago. I don't know where it went. And I think the, it has become very optional and only a thing that people do if they're in fear of getting canceled, they don't feel like they need to be diverse.

If you look at just the landscape of luxury brands, I, it's very easy. Any any of them that you name, they're all run by white men and all the designers are white men. You have your few exceptions, but it's literally only three. It's not that many. And I do think that, a lot of times people just get caught up in, well, “I like this brand and I want to work with them,” and all of that. Like, there are a million reasons, and I'm not. And I don't say that out of judgment, but I do think that a lot of my work, both at The Cut and with Black and Fashion Council, is making sure that Black designers aren't just emailed during Black History Month when somebody needs to put their brand in a round up or they're like, oh, we need to have a Q&A, let's hurry up, because “the Super Bowl, Kendrick, like we need—”

It’s like, guys—designers have been doing this, and then you pretend to care and give them a little bit, but then, you know, you never call it in. You never actually spend time to, to get to know the brand, etc. And I see a lot of I mean, fashion is so small also like we, we see each other a lot, we see each other at all these things.

And by the time, you know, I go to shows in Milan and Paris, I can count on one hand how many people of color there are at shows. It's very, very small. And I think that there's just a, it's 100%

tokenism, but it also is just a, “Let us continue to check the box. If we feel like we haven't, we haven't done it. Or if someone said this on Twitter, X, whatever. Then then we'll do it. But it's not something that matters anymore.”

CHARLES BLOW: So I want to end by asking you what we ask all of our guests, which is what gives you hope in this space. Let's start with you, Sarah.

SARA ZIFF: I think that just the fact that we are here, having this conversation gives me hope. When I started organizing my peers, I got eyerolls, and it was like something out of a Zoolander skit. And the fact that this is being taken seriously on this stage is incredibly meaningful.

SINÉAD BURKE: Much to what Lindsay was sharing earlier, the question that I used to get all of the time in fashion spaces was, “Where are all the disabled designers?” Which is an interesting and not interesting question, because one: What it assumes is that there were no disabled designers already, when the reality is there's a complete lack of psychological safety in fashion.

But in most other industries, for people with non apparent disabilities to self-identify and identify as disabled, there are many disabled designers. There has to be, purely from a demographic perspective. But what is also missing is a critical path for the next generation of disabled designers to be designers. So when Doctor Ben Berry was appointed as Dean of Fashion at Parsons here in New York and he himself a disabled queer man, I DM'd him on Instagram and said, “Hey, you’re disabled, I'm disabled, we should do something.” And last year we created the Disabled Fashion Student Program at Parsons, and we currently have six—

[applause]

The first cohort was funded by H&M, the Ford Foundation, Carmen Busquets, and the next cohort is funded by Capri Holdings Foundation. But we have six people across the degree and the MFA fashion program. Three of them are here in the room tonight.

And it's not just about funding their education. It's also about making sure that they have accessible accommodation in the city. It's about making sure that the program in and of itself is not just accessible, but anti-ableism. It's about making sure that these students themselves have a pathway to internship and employment. And we see our job now as making the industry ready for them so that when the industry says, “Where are the disabled designers?” They're right here, you guys.

LINDSAY PEOPLES: Any time that I find this work to be exhaustive, because it really can be when you feel like you're fighting for something that should just be a basic human right, I think I really haven't earned the right to give up yet.

CHARLES BLOW: Let's give our panel a round of applause.

[applause]

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