

Neighbours: more actors come forward with allegations of racist slurs and discrimination on set

Exclusive: Sharon Johal left the Australian soap last month but says she endured a 'painful' four years, alleging 'direct, indirect and casual racism' from fellow cast members



Neighbours actor Sharon Johal taking part in the Women of Influence panel during Chandon Ladies Day at Sydney's Rosehill Gardens Racecourse on 13 March 2021.

Kelly Burke

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One of *Neighbours*' longstanding cast members has claimed she endured "direct, indirect and casual racism" on set, including racial slurs and mockery, saying the past four years starring in the long-running Australian soapie were "painful and problematic".

In a detailed 1,500 word statement provided to Guardian Australia, Sharon Johal said she tried to "deny, bury and ultimately survive" racist taunts allegedly from some of her colleagues. She also claimed that the television show's production company, Fremantle Media, failed to take any effective action to rein in the alleged behaviour and left her feeling powerless, isolated and marginalised.

Johal has since posted her full statement on her website via her social media pages.

Johal, who left the show last month after portraying the central character of Dipi Rebecchi on the Network 10 show since April 2017, alleged during her four-year tenure

on the show she was repeatedly referred to as one of “you people” by another cast member when they referenced people of Indian descent.

Johal said she initially asked her colleague what was meant by “you people” and she was told “you know, Indians”.

Johal also alleges a crew member alerted her and her husband to the fact one cast member was repeatedly referring to her on set as “the black one” behind her back. The Guardian has spoken to this crew member who said “the black one” reference towards Johal was used on multiple occasions to “entertain” the Neighbours set, but never within earshot of Johal herself.

“[We’re] the crusty old television crew, and we’ve seen a bit, but...we were shocked that [the cast member] was so open and brazen with what they were saying, and we just thought...they were like holding court,” the crew member said.

“And [the cast member] called [Johal] the black one, and said ‘she had no skill or ability’ and ‘it only got the job because of...a token kind of inclusiveness’.”

Johal has also alleged a former cast member compared her to a bobble-head toy, and on other occasions, despite her repeatedly asking them to refrain from doing so, they mimicked in front of her the Indian character Apu from The Simpsons, “with accompanying Indian accent and movement of head”.

“There are many people at Neighbours who are genuinely working behind the scenes to support minorities [but from some cast members] I was not supported in these distressing moments,” she said.

Indigenous actor Shareena Clanton, who first raised allegations of racism on the Neighbours set last week, told the Guardian she witnessed first-hand a crew member and a cast member calling Johal a “cunt” on set on separate occasions, after the Indian-Australian actor confronted her coworkers over offensive comments.

“I was later told by the same cast member that the only reason [Johal] and other people of colour are hired was to fulfil the show’s diversity quota and not because they were any good,” Clanton said.

“They said ‘you just have to have a different coloured skin that’s not white and speak in a funny accent’.”

Johal said she had decided to speak out because she believed the controversy had become a human rights issue and she wanted to play a role in bringing about transformative change, not just at Neighbours but “to the screen industry more broadly”.

As a woman of colour, she said she recognised the “great strides” the television show had made in recent years and the contribution the series had made to her own career.

“But it is clear the system has failed,” she said. “It’s both heartbreaking and telling of our industry that a show considered diverse still struggles with protecting these people in reality, behind the scenes.”



Sharon Johal attending the NGV Gala 2019 at the National Gallery of Victoria on 30 November 2019.

Johal said she complained to Fremantle Media on a number of occasions about racist comments on the *Neighbours* set.

“I was sympathised with and [one] actor was reprimanded on one occasion, unfortunately causing me to be targeted further, [but] no further action was taken,” she said. “The company’s position was that I needed to come to them directly at the time each of these incidents occurred.”

Johal said she believed the production house failed to take into consideration the reticence of a victim to come forward in a workplace culture in which perpetrators were not seen to be held accountable, and in circumstances where the victim was afraid of being further targeted by the perpetrator and believed they risked losing their job if they reported the incident.

After fellow Indigenous actor Meyne Wyatt responded to Clanton’s allegations, posting on Twitter last week that he too had been the victim of racism while working on the *Neighbours* set between 2014 and 2016, Fremantle issued a statement.

“We do not tolerate behaviour that does not align to our Anti-Discrimination, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Harassment & Bullying Policy and take all complaints very seriously, investigating all allegations fairly and thoroughly,” the statement said.

The company said it would conduct an independent review into alleged systemic racism on the *Neighbours* set.

“We remain committed to ensuring a respectful and inclusive workplace for all employees on the set of *Neighbours* and take very seriously any questions about racism

or any other form of discrimination,” a spokesperson from Fremantle Asia Pacific said in a statement to Guardian Australia in response to Johal’s allegations.

“We are engaging an independent legal investigation to work concurrently with [Indigenous consultancy firm] Campfire X’s cultural review and hope to work directly with the individuals that have raised concerns, following which we will take whatever next steps are appropriate.”

Network Ten, which screens Neighbours in Australia, said in a statement last week: “Network 10 does not tolerate discriminatory or racist behaviour in any form. We work closely with all our production partners to ensure everyone has access to a diverse, inclusive and safe working environment. We support ongoing education and dialogue in the fight against racism and discrimination. We will work with Fremantle, and all cast and crew, to investigate and ensure Neighbours continues to foster a fully inclusive environment.”

‘Discriminatory’ contract

Another former Neighbours actor has told the Guardian that while he did not experience any examples of overt racism on set, he believed the way he and his fellow actors of colour were treated by some senior management at Fremantle Media had been discriminatory.

Sachin Joab, who was hired in 2011 and spent two years on the Neighbours set, said he was initially thrilled when he was cast as Erinsborough lawyer Ajay Kapoor. It was only the second major role the Australian-born actor had won where he did not have to feign an Indian or Middle Eastern accent.

Joab told the Guardian it was made clear to him that the show’s production house, Fremantle Media, was looking to boost its UK ratings, and with an Indian diaspora of more than 1.4 million people, Fremantle believed the introduction of a character of Indian heritage would reel in that UK demographic.

After a tentative few episodes, Joab’s character was declared a success and he was provided with a wife (played by Menik Gooneratne), and a teenage daughter (played by Coco Cherian).

But the employment conditions offered to the Indian-Australian actor were very different to his Caucasian counterparts, Joab said.



Sachin Joab played Ajay Kapoor on Neighbours from 2011 to 2013.

“[The Kapoors] were shooting every single day, Monday to Friday. And other actors that were full-timers, all of whom were Caucasian, they might show up and do a scene once a day, then have a whole day off, or several days. Yet, they’d get paid weekly wages plus annual leave and sick leave and whatever else, whereas [I] wasn’t getting any of that.”

It was only after Joab's agent threatened to start sending him to auditions for other shows due to lack of job security, that a full-time contract was finally produced – and for the minimal 12-month period, Joab said.

Contracts terminated

Shortly after the permanent contract was issued, the show had a change of producers. Joab said that when his 12-month contract expired, all three Kapoor characters were axed along with the only other remaining non-Caucasian character, played by Iranian-born actor Alin Sumarwata. The four sackings took place within a matter of weeks of each other, he said.

“We were all replaced with white actors,” he said.

Joab was told he and his on-screen daughter would be written out of the show by being “sent back to India”.

“I asked [the production company], ‘How can we go back to a country that we’re not from and haven’t been to? Both of our characters are born and raised right here in Australia’.”

Joab said that when he confronted the production company about all four non-Caucasian actors having had their contracts terminated, a senior member of production said: “Sachin, in order to do my job, I have to be a cunt.”

The show subsequently issued a press release stating that all four departing actors had left on their own accord.

Aside from the public statements already quoted, Fremantle has refused to directly address the specific allegations made by Johal, Joab, Clanton and Wyatt.

“While we have a review underway, Fremantle/Neighbours is making no further comment,” a spokesperson said.

The cost of speaking up

Joab, who is now based in Los Angeles, said he was hesitant to speak up in 2013.

“How do we know that if we do speak up, that we never ever get hired again? And that’s the thing ... if you step out of line with all the decision makers that just coincidentally, are all Caucasian, what do you do?”

Johal is contracted by Fremantle to make a return guest appearance on Neighbours in coming weeks. She said news of Fremantle’s investigation was welcome, but the investigation needed to be widened to include all forms of discrimination, not limited to race, gender, sexual orientation and identity.

The former Melbourne lawyer said she was a firm believer in “doing the right thing” and allowing for due process, but said she felt “morally compelled” to support the actors who had come forward with their experiences of racism, at a huge cost to themselves.

“I have tried to speak up, whilst uncomfortable (and scary), when I was employed full-time on the show through the appropriate channels,” she said.

“But when a person of minority ‘goes public’, it is often as a last resort and a cry for help, after all avenues of reporting and educating the perpetrator have failed.

“History has shown us there is no benefit to people of colour or minority to speak up ... we often do it at a great cost, at the risk of our livelihoods, opening ourselves up for further vilification, bullying and victim shaming/blaming.”