

Episode 15: From Good Girl to Sovereign Woman, with Monique Debose

Mandy: Hello and welcome to Enough, the podcast. I'm your host, Mandy Lehto. This show is a mashup of inspiration and exploration around what gets in the way of us feeling good enough. If you're a leader whose life looks shiny and together from the outside, but inside your inner critic assures you that you are one hot mess, this podcast is for you. It's time to own your worth, quirks, foibles, imperfections, and all. Welcome to Enough.

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be worthy of love and belonging as a woman, especially with all that good girl conditioning that so many of us grew up with. Be nice, small, cute, appropriate, agreeable, and palatable. Don't be too loud. Don't take up too much space. Don't ask for too much, lest you seem too demanding. Sacrifice your wants and dreams to support others. Oh, and smile through it all like a demented Barbie no matter how you're feeling inside. Then pile on motherhood, race, and the cluster suck of the pandemic. Exhausted yet?

I wanted to have this important conversation with singer, songwriter, and playwright, Monique Debose, a self-professed former good girl who shares how she is shedding old habits and behaviors as a black mixed-race woman. Where does one even evolve to out of the good girl? It's not necessarily into "bad girl." Where are we moving into as we leave these patterns behind?

Monique: We're moving into sovereign woman.

Mandy: Oh, I love that.

Monique: That's so beautiful. Good girl to sovereign woman. From girl to woman. It's really about growth.

Mandy: This episode is relatable, practical, and is also laced with music from Monique's latest album, You Are The Sovereign One. Hit play. We'll see you on the other side.

What do you want more of?

Monique: Well, let's just jump right in.

Mandy: Let's jump right in.

Monique: I want more peace inside my body. I want more sex and sensuality. I want more joy. If I had to sum it up, those are three things.

Mandy: Sounds pretty darn good to me. Tell us a little bit more about your More Movement because it's such a delicious question to mull over. Tell us why you created this.

Monique: I wrote a song probably over 10–15 years ago called More and it became my theme song. It is about a woman who has chosen fear, doubt, worry, and safety, even. Those things really locked her in a box. I flipped it and decided, no, I want to choose more. The song. I'd perform it at coffee shops and that kind of thing and people loved it. There would always be laughter in the audience when they'd hear the lyric, oh, I need a minute to myself, I'm going to take my ovaries off the shelf, and be the woman that I know I am. It just always resonated.

Recently, I just got clarity that it's time for the song to actually be out in the world. In putting it out in the world, so many more women resonated with it and kept writing to me and saying, oh, I choose more this, I choose more that. So we organically created a social media campaign where women around the world would stand, take photos of themselves, hold the I choose more sign, and put in what they chose more

of. It's really a call to all women to wake up from the sunken place of what I have is enough, I can't ask for more. I can't have the life I genuinely want and desire.

Mandy: Which is one of the reasons I really wanted to have this conversation with you is because this series of the podcast is dedicated to really getting curious about this good girl conditioning that so many of us have grown up with. Seeing the intersection of that with capitalism and patriarchy, and the way that women, in particular, seem to be willing to deplete ourselves to achieve something, which is to get to a place of feeling enough.

The thing is, it's a game that's rigged against us. Maybe it's being 50, I don't know what made the scales fall from my eyes, but I don't want to play that game anymore. I realized still how these old habits of being the good girl, that conditioning to don't take up space. I don't even remember where it came from. This don't make a scene dear, don't make a scene. Making a scene was not having a wobble in the supermarket because I couldn't get the Snickers bar. Making a scene was sometimes speaking my truth about something like, I don't want to wear that ugly brown dress. It's itchy and it's gross.

Just do what you're told. Children should be seen and not heard. I was saying to you before the recording, how many dates did I go on as a young woman? I didn't even like the dude, but he liked me. Being in this place of not being able to say, have boundaries like, yes, sure, I'll stay late girl, being that pick me girl, being that lack of boundaries girl, or anything goes with my body with that guy that I'm not even sure I like but he likes me. It's this good girl conditioning that I really want to come to grips with and pull apart in this episode. I'm wondering if you can think of one of the first times when you experienced being the good girl.

Monique: I'm sure it wasn't the first but immediately while you were speaking, two things popped in my brain. One, my mom's an Irish Catholic woman and was adamant about taking us to church. I remember being a young person saying to her, this isn't for me. I don't believe in what they're saying. I was just a young kid. I was like, this doesn't work for me. She said to me outright, you don't know what you want, you will do this.

From that moment, it probably just shook inside me knowing and saying, oh, one of the two people in the world who I've built my world around is my safety or my everything has told me I don't know what I want. So I must not know what I want. I remember that moment.

Then I also have moments of fighting and actually saying to my mom, I don't want to go to this place. She's like, oh, you're going. I remember thinking, oh, I'll be clever. I'll put on the worst outfit. I put on a clown outfit. It was so bad. I came downstairs. I was like, okay, you want to go then I'm going like this. I could see now as a mother, I'm imagining what was happening inside her, all the Terminator calculations. She came to the conclusion, all right, let's just go and so she said, all right, get in the car. I was mortified.

That also was something that kind of stuck with me. It's like, oh, if I push and say no, that's still not enough. So that good girl piece is there. Speaking about race, my dad is African American. I identify as a black woman who is mixed. I am now 40-something and I live in one of the most affluent zip codes in Los Angeles, maybe in the United States. I still have these thoughts in my head when I go into stores. Make sure you appear a certain way, make sure you feel non-threatening, and make sure this.

I'm exhausted from walking around with those ideas, but those things still jump out into my consciousness. I know the good girl piece and it is exhausting.

Mandy: Did this affect how you were choosing romantic partners, for example? I go back to my example of, I need to look a certain way, I need to be tiny, I need to be really interesting. I need to like whatever he likes, for example. How did the good girl play out in that part of your life?

Monique: With men and relationships, actually even good girl, there were moments that I was attracted to women. I knew that was not appropriate in my mother's home. I remember being a teenager and having kind of a crush on one of my friends. I just had a sense from my mother that that was nowhere to go. I'm aware of that piece, so I forgot about that piece.

In terms of relationship, yeah, even in how I chose my husband. I love him and appreciate him. There are many great things about him. He looked like somebody who would be safe to be with, somebody who would be appropriate to be with. I know that factored into the situation as well. So yeah, I mean, it runs rampant.

Mandy: I went through a phase in my 20s, not that I was consciously trying to get rid of the good girl conditioning, but I went for these really bad guys. It's kind of exciting to try on this new persona with some proverbial guy with the black leather jacket and the motorbikes, so to speak. I didn't know how to meld into that.

This is for me, anyway, one of the signs of the good girl is that I will become you. I will become an extension of you and lose myself entirely because I'm not actually sure that who I am has any value, aside from how I kind of mirror your greatness to you. I think this is one of the most tragic things when I look back at my younger self of like, oh, honey, come on, you can be you.

Monique: Well, if we're really honest, Mandy, I think women have been bred and conditioned. These words are powerful, strong words that might cause people to respond. Women have been conditioned to erase themselves, to fit in, to be a part of, to be the second fiddle, to be that energy that supports and uplifts something outside of themselves, all in service to moving society further. That works from the lens of who that society is for, which is male and white male.

From that lens and from that perspective, it makes sense and it works. But if you actually look at the person who is having that experience—the woman—it does not work for her. She is not allowed to be her full, voluptuous, vivacious, intelligent, and creative self. That piece is a big part of why I do the work.

I also add that piece of race because speaking from somebody from the United States, a black person, an African American person, slavery worked. Second-class citizenship worked for people who are white male and people who are white female. But it didn't work if you look at it from the perspective of the person who is being forced to work for no pay, for your families to be pulled apart, for you to not be able to actually buy a home for your family when you actually have money, for you to have homes, and societies actually thriving. Then people will be mad about that and destroy and burn it down.

From that perspective, no, it doesn't work. That is what my work is all about. I am all about owning all the parts of ourselves so we can truly be free. All those pieces that we've been asked as women as people of color to put away, to hide away, to squish down, even though they are what make us ourselves and so beautifully alive. That's what my work is about.

I am about embracing and owning all those pieces of ourselves, creating safe containers so that people can come in and actually see themselves, try themselves on, and know that they're safe to do that. That's what my work is really about—through my music, through my plays, and through the groups that I'm running for people. That's what I'm about because I'm done with the good girl. All of it.

Mandy: I just want to honor that because this is what we need to hear right now. We need leaders like you, Monique, who are going out and doing this work. What I was going to add to the list, not only in relationships but what adds to the kind of cluster [...] of all of this is motherhood.

Monique: I didn't know we could say [...] in this. Yeah.

Mandy: Motherhood. Oh my word. Let's mother perfectly. Let's suppress our own needs. Let's not have desires. A woman with desires that she expresses love is okay, sex is okay, but intimacy and desire, all of these things. This completely got further discombobulated when I became a mom. I need to do it this way. I wasn't reading Dr. Spock. I don't mean it that way. These pressures to lose myself and now become all about doing the Montessori, doing the maths, and making sure that they can read the latest Joan Didion by the age of four.

Monique: Wow, you had a lot for your kids there. I'm not there.

Mandy: Tell me about how your good girl played out when you became a mom?

Monique: Well, for a good while, I'd say probably the first four to six years, it was all about the children. Everything that I wanted to do before I had children got pushed way back. My kids are ten and almost eight. I really honor that time because I feel like there was nothing else I could do. As a parent, as the mother, having this child suckle on my breast like, I needed to be there. During that time, I was frustrated. I remember seeing my husband. His career really kept going and taking off and me sitting at home, feeling exhausted, feeling useless, where I was not useless.

I was giving life to a human being, but feeling useless because our society really says we got to keep going, we got to keep moving. There wasn't space and time for both. Looking back now, I am appreciative that I actually had the space and energy. I was not a mother who had to go out of the house, go to work, and have to be away from my child. I do see the value in that piece for me and for my children.

Speaking to the piece you're speaking of, yes, absolutely. There are still things that I feel like I have to hide for my children. I don't get to fully be me in my own home. It's like if I just want to laze around, chill out, and just watch something on TV. I know that's not necessarily, but it's my own form of self-care sometimes. If I hear the door opening, I literally go and turn off the TV and pretend like I'm doing something else. That's a [...] nightmare.

Mandy: I remember when I was a kid and my parents were having an afternoon nap. They said, if anybody calls, don't tell them that we're napping. Tell them that we're outside chopping wood or something. I didn't question it. That was the way it was. In our kitchen, we had a sign that said, them who works eats. It was this culture of you must not rest. Even being a very woke woman, we've both spent years working on ourselves and doing the deep inner work.

I was reading that—I think it was in the Atlantic recently—the whole pandemic has brought women back to the 1950s in so many ways. A recent study from McKinsey and the Lean In organization said that we're doing 20 hours of work in addition to our full work schedule. I think the majority of layoffs that have happened during the pandemic have been women. We are in a burnout and mental health crisis that's waiting to happen. I've heard it described in the press as women's silent scream.

I'm really feeling with all my intuition right now and with the exhausted powerful women that I coach and that are in my community, that everybody has grade A exhaustion right now. There's also this feeling that something has to change. We are at a saturation point as women are fed up, and we have had enough of playing these outdated roles that no longer serve us, our kids, or our societies. There obviously is a culture that benefits from us depleting ourselves but I'm done. I'm done with that.

Monique: What does that look like for you being done with that?

Mandy: One of the things that it's expressing itself is having these kinds of conversations because this is very new for me. One of the things in terms of my good girlness is don't make waves. Don't make a scene. Don't make any kind of confrontation. If there was any confrontation at home it was just, please pass the mashed potatoes or let's sweep that under the carpet very quickly. It's not a judgment of my family. It's just confrontation is something I have spent most of my life being so uncomfortable around.

Monique: Yeah, I understand that.

Mandy: Moving swiftly along, making a joke, and breaking the tension somehow. This is controversial to be able to say I don't participate. I choose not to participate, and one of the ways I want to do this is to have these conversations with powerful women who are also done.

Monique: Yeah. I've been done, girl. It still shows up, but I am conscious to know like, oh it's showing up right now. What I do is I write music and I write art that is a commentary on our society. I'm having this workshop for my album that I just released recently called *You Are The Sovereign One* and I decided that it should be an experience. So I've created this seven-week course where I'm taking seven songs from the album and we are creating sovereign women at the end of the seven weeks.

We're going to start on week one with a song and then we're going to go into what are you actually wanting to create? What would actually have you be alive? Then through the seven weeks, the seven songs, and the seven lessons, we're going to really open that door and create that for women. You just made me think of one of the songs from the album which is Human Condition. It really is about us owning all the parts of ourselves.

I just said I've been done with that. Yes, and I am a human being, and some of our default programming still slips right back in. So what do we do with that when that happens? It's about embracing, being gentle, and compassionate with ourselves so that we don't shame ourselves right back into that same pattern of okay, I better be the good girl and be quiet again.

Mandy: Where are we growing into? If we're leaving good girl conditioning, what does it look like to come out the other side? I don't really know what to call it. The opposite of good girl isn't bad girl.

Monique: No. As you said that, what immediately popped is we're moving into sovereign woman, right? That's so beautiful. Good girl, to sovereign woman. From girl to woman, it's really about growth, strengthening our nervous system, being able to hold possibly conflicting ideologies, and knowing which one we're moving towards. I feel like that's what is happening.

We are growing our nervous system to be able to be present with ideas that diametrically oppose each other at times. That can be crazy-making, but that is where we're going. We are possibly in the desert right now moving towards this beautiful—I'm not going to call it an oasis because it's more than that or a mirage.

Mandy: We're going back and forth. It's like a big north star. The sovereign woman is like, at least for me, that was exactly what came up. I had this image because you talked about the desert. I'm seeing this big North Star, it's a direction to walk into because it's not necessarily the closer you get the more newness, more deliciousness, and more desire will present itself. It's a process and it's evolving, it's a becoming. That's what came to me. It's a direction to walk in and things to leave.

I love your seven-week course and your seven songs, which reminded me of one of the things I did when I was releasing some of my good girlness. I went to a women's retreat where we did the dance of the seven veils. Unfortunately, it wasn't your music but there was a piece of music that was played at full blast and we got to wear these eye shades. Mine was from British Airways, the kind that you get when you take an overnight flight.

Everybody wore eyeshades and we were loaded up like sumo wrestlers with all these layers of clothes that we had to wear after lunch. I had trackpads and cardigans. I had sweat running down between my boobs. The first song was a Shania Twain song and we moved our bodies with whatever wanted to appear. Each time a song came on we've stripped off a layer.

Monique: Love it. It's a great idea.

Mandy: Let some of that good girlness go. What is it that I want to say? [...] it. That's what we had to do with the leader saying, [...] it, release. By the time that it was optional on the seventh layer to go completely starkers, I just thought, I'm going for it. I am going for it. My ultimate release at the end was what other people thought about me.

Does it mean it's gone forever? Hell no. It's still a direction to walk into. But it's the releasing of what other people think about me, the releasing of being afraid of confrontation, and the being able to speak the truth, especially to power.

Monique: Yes, that's the piece. I think when we say that even speak truth to power, and I'm in there with you right now, Mandy, I am in there. But the ideal scene is remembering that we too are power. When we say speak truth to power, I think that immediately takes us out of the position of power and puts us as weak. I just want to really remind all of us that we are power as well. Speaking truth to power. Let's speak truth to ourselves. Remember that we are power and then have a conversation with somebody else.

Mandy: Yes, yes, yes, yes. I love this.

Monique: I'm with you and I'm 100% there with you. Confrontation is something I would not like to be involved in. I had a really wise friend recently say to me, being an Enneagram type 4, which is a whole another way to look at life, as human beings he was saying, we often see the direct route and we make things way more difficult. I know that for sure in my life.

As I'm moving to sovereign woman, let me tune in simply to what I am desiring, what would bring me joy, what would bring me a feeling of accomplishment, and what would bring me a feeling of safety inside myself? Let me move in that direction. Let that be my north star or the oasis I'm coming to.

Mandy: Because this is also part of the good girl gig, right? I must make things as hard as possible to hope to get the crumbs of validation from someone who will pat me on the head and say, well done, until I need to do it all again and it's exhausting.

Monique: If you are just clear with what you desire and you put that request or that desire out, it will show up. I just don't have very much practice in that. Like you're saying, a lot of women don't have very much practice because we're taught from very early, don't go for what you want, go for what they want, or what they need you to be. That just confuses and makes things so much more challenging and harder than they need to be.

Mandy: We do have role models all around us if we start to pay attention. There are role models like Simone Biles. There are role models like Naomi Osaka. There are role models like Monique Debose.

If we start to think about how we can actually take more action practically, one thing that you already said is realize that you are power. So that's a major thing. What else would you say to somebody who is all fired up, and they think yes, this is for me? What could they go away and try or do to start moving towards that oasis or north star?

Monique: What immediately jumps out is be in conversations with other women. I think it's great that they're listening to this podcast. In your community and women in my community, I think it's important to be in a safe container with other women to be able to start playing with this concept of like, how do I take off this layer and let's get practical.

One of the things I think women can do right now is start with a simple list of what do I want? Not that you have to have it, not that you have to ever get it, but just creating a space for yourself to ask, what do I want? Don't let yourself think about it. It's the sentence stem. I want or if desire is a more fun word for you, I desire. That might be too controversial, actually. It can be, I want... and let yourself just go until the page is done. It's whatever you want, whatever comes up.

Mandy: Okay, let's make this real. You start then I'll volley back.

Monique: Okay. I want to dance naked.

Mandy: I want non-meat meals made for me every week. I'm trying to eat less meat.

Monique: I want to win a Grammy for this work I think is so valuable.

Mandy: And so it is. So it is. Let's bring that energy to Monique. I want to get a juicy book deal.

Monique: I want to enjoy surfing with my sons.

Mandy: Beautiful. It can be these types of things. It can be world peace. It can be, I really want those pink shoes.

Monique: Exactly.

Mandy: It could be anything.

Monique: Mandy and I were doing it in real-time. I really recommend, don't even think about it. Don't even put value on it after you've gotten it out. It can be like, I want to have a really good poop. I know it might be TMI, but this is your own private list. So you just write and don't judge it, let it go. I want the new Mac lipstick. I want air conditioning in my house. I want a really great pen. I want my husband to hold the back of my neck when he kisses me. I want to bounce on the trampoline. Just let it flow.

What I notice with a lot of women I work with and through my own experience personally, I notice that our systems, our pipes are clogged—going back to that wonderful poop metaphor. Sorry to bring that back up. Our energetic pipes are clogged because we've just stuffed down everything we've desired. We've let one small thing pop through and we shine really great in this area, but everything else is a deep dark mess.

When we're doing this exercise, we are letting things flow. We're making movement happen. Once we clean that pipe out and just have a great place for things to flow, all the delicious ideas and energies that really are why you are here on the planet get to be heard by you clearly. That is gold.

Mandy: Not everything we do has to be for some future value, right?

Monique: Absolutely.

Mandy: There is so much joy in doing something because it feels good or because it's just fun for us.

Monique: Or because it's been asked of us and inside ourselves. Because there are things I do sometimes in my work that don't feel good at the moment. It's pushing against my humaneness. It's pushing against my ego. It's pushing against that good girl energy that is really trying to hold on tight. It's so much more powerful because it's coming from that place of the sovereign woman. It's like, girlfriend, you are cute, but you need to sit down. Just sit down, good girl. Just sit down. I've got this.

It doesn't always feel good because you are in that moment. What are we doing it for? That greater cause and that greater experience are so much more valuable than letting the good girl run us. It's not why we're here.

Mandy: Can you on the hoof make us up an exercise that we could do to start coming into the world as her? On the one hand, it's a north star or an oasis to walk towards, but I'm suspecting it's also a place to come from.

Monique: Absolutely. Absolutely. All right, Mandy.

Mandy: Challenge on. Game on, Monique.

Monique: Game on. Challenge accepted. Find yourself a comfortable place to lay down or sit with yourself, a place where you feel safe. Let yourself scan your body energetically. What I mean by that is to start with your feet. Put your attention on your feet and slowly move up to your ankles, through your shins, to your knees, to your thighs, to your glutes, to your pussy, to your belly, to your breast, to your chest, to your arms, to your fingertips, to the tip of your head, to the top of the pieces of hair on your head. Scan that entire experience.

Notice where there's a great deal of delicious energy. It can be fluttering. It can be pulsating. It can be waves. Notice that and once you find a place that feels in alignment with good and curiosity, here we go, ladies. Ask that place. Will you please let me know what needs to happen next for me? How do I awaken you, my sovereign woman?

After you ask that question, listen to that part of your body and listen to what it says. You can be in a conversation with it. Ask any questions you want. I promise you, you will be amazed at the wisdom that comes from that part of you. That is your sovereign self. That's what the exercise is.

A great place to start is my website, moniquedebosemusic.com. I'm always on social media, Facebook and Instagram at @IamMoniqueDebose. The You Are The Sovereign One course begins October 5th. So if you'd like to join us, go to my website, and join us.

Mandy: Listen, please purchase Monique's gorgeous album. I love your Human Condition. That is like an anthem for my mornings. It's a beautiful way to start the day. Monique, before we leave our listeners, I ask every guest to share a brick of wisdom for a woman who's on this journey. It can be whatever you're present to. It can be a quote. It can be a word. What would you say?

Monique: I have a quote, a little note I've put to myself on my computer, it's a little post-it. Look at and put energy into the positives of your life. Know that you may sometimes focus on the dark or the challenge and just know that that is part of being a human being and look at and put energy into the positives of your life.

Mandy: Thank you, sovereign woman, for playing today. It's been such a joy and a juicy conversation.

Monique: Thanks, Mandy. Thank you so much.

Mandy: Okay, so how amazing is Monique Debose? I would love it if you would share this conversation with somebody who needs a bit of her magic. Of that, there is much, so go on to her website. Check out her course, *You Are The Sovereign One*, and her beautiful new album. Get yourself a little bit of Monique Debose love over on Instagram as well.

Keep your seatbelt fastened because next week I have the force of nature that is Christina Glickman. Between you and me, she's my girl crush. She is a mother. She's a TEDx speaker. She's the author of the best-selling book, *Xtra: The Art of Being*. She is stylish, sassy, and has the biggest heart I have ever experienced over on the socials. She's just one of those warm human beings that you want to sit down and have a conversation with. So you're welcome. I've done it for you.

We talk about intentionally showing up for ourselves. When we step out of being nice and going for gold stars and just consciously push the big red button on the hustle machine, how did she do that? Here's a little taster of what you can expect.

Christina: I spent years performing—being the good girl, doing all the things I should be doing. But I never ever felt the way I feel today which is fully full and that there is no space that I don't belong in.

Mandy: Thank you so much for being here and for playing with us. I hope you got a lot from this conversation with Monique, and I look forward to playing with you next week. This is Mandy Lehto, signing out for *Enough*, the podcast.