“Data doesn't change action. It's storytelling that changes hearts and minds.” Amita Swadhin of Mirror Memoirs on intersectionality, justice, and breaking cycles of violence

Lissa Harris
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Lissa Harris: Could you please start by introducing yourself, your organization, the issues that you're working on, and how you’re tackling them?

Amita Swadhin: My name is Amita Swadhin, I use they and them pronouns. I am a queer, non-binary femme person who is the child of immigrants from India and South Asia. I was born and raised in the United States (US), specifically in New York City and Northern New Jersey. I am a survivor of eight years of incestuous rape by my father. And I like to articulate these days in my adulthood, I'm also a survivor of state violence through the mandated reporting process.

I've been in the work to make sense of my life by trying to end child sexual abuse. I had the privilege of going to college in Washington DC at Georgetown and worked at the Violence Against Women Office at the US Department of Justice as an 18-year-old, which is an interesting way to start this trajectory.

For the past eight-and-a-half years, I've been the founder and co-executive director of Mirror Memoirs, a community of belonging in the US focusing on ending child sexual abuse without

abandoning survivors or relying on violent state systems. It is an abolitionist approach. The word abolition is not about ending child sexual abuse but comes from the movement of abolishing enslavement and its infrastructures in the US, like courts, prisons, police, and state-led psychiatric institutions that since the formation of this country have been weaponized against Black, Native, and other racialized and oppressed communities.

We have lots of mainstream data on the problem of child sexual abuse, especially abuse of LGBTQ children of color, [in state-sponsored institutions]. I was a policy student in undergrad and graduate school and learned that data doesn't change action. It's storytelling that changes hearts and minds. Neurobiology shows that human beings are wired as storytellers. We have mirror neurons in our brain, that's where the name Mirror Memoirs comes from.

The science of storytelling shows that when an honest storyteller sits in front of listeners willing to believe, this beautiful mirror neuron activation happens in people's brains and fosters empathy. That's basic human technology. It's cool that the act of being believed when you tell your story as a child sexual abuse survivor has been scientifically proven, in the early stages of the first people you tell, to determine how acute or not complex PTSD will be in your life and journey. Human beings are literally wired to heal each other.

Part of the work of Mirror Memoirs is about not getting into arguments about police and prisons being violent. You can sidestep that by uplifting people's stories. This is a community of belonging for anyone who wants to understand what an abolitionist praxis of ending child sexual abuse looks like. That is a lot of gobbledygook for people like my parents and sister who are not organizers. They're just everyday people who have a survivor in their direct family and who lived through a lot of violence as a unit.

My mom and stepdad, my sister, my grandmother, my aunt and cousins, all those folks, we've been on a healing journey together for about 30 years. They're a litmus test for whether my work makes sense. It started by me traveling across the United States from 2016 to 2018, recording 60 different stories of LGBTQ, Black, Native, and of color child sexual abuse survivors.

Our board members and staff are our core members. We have a two-tiered membership in Mirror Memoirs. Core members are LGBTQ, BIPOC, and child sexual abuse survivors. Everyone else are accomplice members who want to learn and heal with us, support us, support each other, and be in a relationship with each other and this network.

Today we have 700 core members and 1,300 accomplice members across the United States. We started small with 60 people who wanted to tell their stories. One of our founding board members, Dr. Treva Ellison, happens to be a Black trans person who is a survivor, and was also a professor and is a researcher. I have a research background. Together we made the inquiry questions and trained five of the storytellers from our archive in participatory research. We used ATLAS.ti software to code all 60 stories into data, and we started doing training institutes, healing circles, listening sessions, and commissioning artwork from photo collage artists and cartoonists.

The first phase of our work was building that archive, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we became much bigger and broader. We have a national membership base, monthly meetings, cohort-based training programs, political education, healing justice work, and a theater project created during the pandemic. The archive is the backbone of our work and is finally released after the election. Around 40 of the 73 stories in the archive will come out. Some survivors are undecided whether they want to release the story, but all of the stories are being spun into data.

My co-director Jaden Fields is 12 years younger than me. He is a Black trans man who's a survivor of commercial sex trafficking as a child in Los Angeles and a leader as an abolitionist in the anti-trafficking movement. He's deliberately 12 years younger than me because we're not going to end child sexual abuse in a generation. That's irresponsible to say because the only way to get funding to end child sexual abuse in a generation is to rely on the state, and that leaves our people behind.

If I didn't believe wholeheartedly that we can end child sexual abuse, I wouldn't do what I do. It's going to take an intergenerational movement to make it happen. I was a youth organizer for 12 years in New York City schools and after-school programs. Young trans-Black and brown kids, youth and teenagers, and even 18 to 24-year-olds need to be part of the architecture of a movement ending violence against them, and that includes child sexual abuse.

Lissa Harris: It seems clear from many survivors' stories that we can't, even if we wanted to, rely on the police and the court system to solve our problems. But when you start telling that to people who don't have direct knowledge, they go, "What? We just have to have more of it then, right?"

Amita Swadhin: Right. It depends on who is the architect of what movement. If you are in a movement that was the brainchild of people who are protected by the state, you're going to get it wrong. We don't start, in most cases, in traditional philanthropy and nonprofit work with the

stories of Black and Native children. It's not convenient or fast, because it forces people to pause and look deeper at what it means that children get raped.

When we say we want to end child sexual abuse, the right question is for whom? My co-director Jaden just gave a talk in Chicago to the Grantmakers in the Arts Conference, and he talks openly about when he was trafficked. He's a transgender man, which means he was seen as a child as a Black girl. He was trafficked to the police and they paid money to rape him.

I grew up lower middle class in a suburb of New York City during my middle school and high school years. In a "respectable town" that was 50% white and had a lot of Asian people, I should have been able to rely on the police or prosecutors for protection. When there was mandated reporting when I was 13 and social workers came to my house and I had to give a report at the police station and talk to the prosecutors of this county in New Jersey, they threatened to incarcerate my mother for being "complicit" in what my father did to me. My mom was 18 when she married my 26-year-old father. They met on a college campus, and he was already a predator by then. She was a teenager. You can imagine, in a textbook way, what happened to her. She was raped and beaten by him for years.

I didn't want my mom who I saw as a victim of my dad for 16 years to be locked in a cell. How was that helping me? And that was the "solution and support" the state offered me. The state has never systematically protected the average family of color. You can lift exceptions. but if we want to end child sexual abuse entirely, we need to be more honest about how we got here.

Lissa Harris: Are you aiming this project at policymakers? Is it to shift views in the general public consciousness? Is it specifically affected communities? Who are your audiences and how do you engage them?

Amita Swadhin: Great question. We mean it when we say Mirror Memoirs is a community of belonging for anyone who wants to end child sexual abuse. We start with our core membership base. We create a place of healing and protection for the people who cannot rely on the state. Other BIPOC and LGBTQI child sexual abuse survivors who want to break the cycle, don't want to pursue violent adult relationships or experience adulthood rape and domestic violence. According to the rates, you're at a much higher risk as a child sexual abuse survivor to experience abuse as an adult.

So how do you break that cycle? A lot of our people are parents or want to become parents. Child sexual abuse tends to be an intergenerational form of violence, even if you're not directly

raped by a parent. Many of us have mothers who are survivors and they get overwhelmed and triggered and turn a blind eye when their child is raped because it brings up their unhealed trauma.

First and foremost, we are creating a place to heal and interrogate our wounds together. We created mutual aid networks of support and moved over $355,000 from our accomplices into the bank accounts of our most economically vulnerable members at the height of the pandemic lockdown.

The next layer is people who are curious about abolition. There's been a lot of mainstream discussion of police and prison abolition in [the United States]. Mariame Kaba was one of my teachers. She was a New York Times crossword puzzle answer during the pandemic lockdown. Dr. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Ruthie, was a New York Magazine cover story. These are not wild ideas anymore, and that's wonderful.

We're trying to reach curious people. And our stories are the last frontier. Our next layer from our core members is anyone who believes that prisons and police are not working, and don't know what to do. Elders like Ruthie, Angela [Davis], Andrea [Ritchie], and Mariame say abolition isn't about an answer. It's about critiquing what's not working and then experimenting. We don't know what it will look like, but we know that investing more in prisons and police is not working. You're not getting a different result if you keep investing in something that's broken.

Our work has been published in the Academic Emergency Medicine Journal, a journal of emergency medicine practitioners, talking about how emergency medical staff often harm trans people when they come to the emergency room. One of our members was raped and beaten during the pandemic, and she's a child sexual abuse survivor, but also an adult survivor. They turned her away at the emergency room and wrote on the intake form that she was drunk, homeless, and transgender, and she was none of those things. She had been drugged and raped. She was full-time employed at one of the largest community centers in Los Angeles.

We are speaking back to those institutions in their language and lexicon through our stories, but also through survivors trained in research and academic work. Our tertiary audience is to get hired to help larger organizations like Futures Without Violence. We've consulted with them many times and spoken at [over 150 colleges and conferences, including dozens of] statewide coalitions against domestic and sexual violence.

When the archive comes out and we have funding to hire a proper communications team, I hope that the general population who condemn child sexual abuse can access the available tools.

Lissa Harris: What makes your approach distinct from other people working in a similar childhood sexual assault space?

Amita Swadhin: Our analysis and understanding that child sexual abuse is not an individual experience, is important. I'm a cast member in a theater project called Secret Survivors with Ping Chong and Company, an off-off-Broadway company in Manhattan. We had wrapped production on the toolkit and the film and nothing could be changed, but I realized after reading a study by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2011 or 2012 that we got it wrong because there were no trans women in that show.

The study said gender nonconformity is a risk factor for child sexual abuse, especially for children who are assigned male at birth but are gender-nonconforming. They're most vulnerable percentage-wise, not numerically. When you look at the data around adulthood rape and sexual assault, it's trans women who are going through that violence at higher rates than anyone.

The researchers shared two hypotheses [at that time]. Number one, similar to using rape as a "corrective tool" against lesbians in South Africa, it's a "corrective form of violence" that someone sees a child being gender non-conforming and wants to "teach" how to be a "normal person."

The second is gender non-conforming children who are emotionally abused first. I'm using the word emotional abuse there, I think they say corrected, critiqued, and unprotected. For example, a transphobic mother who's not assaulting her kids physically or sexually, but saying, "Bobby, you can't wear that dress." And she's making Bobby go and change.

A predator anywhere near that immediate family, maybe another relative, someone in the church, a neighbor, a coach, or a teacher, sees that Bobby is not protected by the mother and maybe can't fully trust her. The predator knows that the child is going to be easier to manipulate and assault. What we see in the Mirror Memoirs audio archive when we interview trans people, and especially trans women, is that the person that raped them when they were a child is the first person who affirmed their gender identity. It's fucked up.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Amita Swadhin: My former board co-chair who's still on my board has permitted me to use her story as an example. Her name is Ebony Harper, and she is a Black trans woman who's well known as an organizer in California, and the co-chair of the Lieutenant Governor of California's Trans Advisory Council. She used to work at the California Endowment, which is a big foundation.

She didn't talk for years about being a childhood rape survivor, who had run away from home at age 12, done survival sex work as a child, and then been put into a child jail, juvenile prison, at the age of 12. It was better living on the streets and selling her body than what she experienced at home. She was very vocal about her experiences as a Black trans woman, she just didn't talk about her childhood in her professional life.

When we met, she was still at the Endowment and I pitched her to get funding. I told her about the American Academy of Pediatrics Study, and she cried and started coming to our programs. It took years of listening and meeting other survivors for her to join our board. She served as board co-chair for two years and became a cast member of our theater project where she's telling her story in depth. It got recorded, there's a curriculum, and it became a cornerstone of what and how we teach.

She's been on panels throughout the country at big philanthropic network conferences proudly saying, "Yeah, I'm a child sexual abuse survivor. And I didn't want people to think I was trans because of what happened to me as a kid. And now I understand that's not why it happened to me, it was the other way around." She's not embarrassed or ashamed anymore. She doesn't feel alone and that's what we do for many people, it's beautiful.

Lissa Harris: We learn as much from things that don't work as things that do. Is there an example of something you tried that didn't work out, but that you learned something important from?

Amita Swadhin: In the early days of Mirror Memoirs, we were small and didn't have much [of a] budget. I didn't have a co-director and I was operating with urgency. We took on more than our capacity could handle, and a lot of money moved around at the height of the pandemic, which was exciting before the current backlash. I'm talking about halfway through 2020 where people allowed themselves to envision and dream about a different world.

I'm working in a pool of systemically disproportionately impoverished people. We have Ivy League professors in our membership base, but we also have a lot of poor folks who are

underemployed because they're trans Black and brown people. And I wanted to get our people that money. I wanted to work on this big government grant with two other national organizations with much more infrastructure and staff than us.

It was hard because it fell apart, and bigger mainstream organizations judged us for not pacing it better. A key to this work is to figure out how to right-size what you're taking on to your true capacity and infrastructure, even if the urgency far outpaces that because otherwise, you're going to make it harder for yourself to get your work done in the long run.

Lissa Harris: What are the biggest barriers to achieving your goals and what strategies do you think to apply?

Amita Swadhin: The survivors who believe in carcerality are a barrier. Not the ones who are struggling and willing to be in the struggle and figure it out together, but the ones who aren't willing to listen to the stories. Maybe they have a strategic plan, got a lot of funding, and are on the cover of whatever magazine wanting to believe they're going to save us all. I don't mean to sound sarcastic, it's just hard to name a true barrier without naming that.

[There is] the mythology in this country of heroes and monsters. It's a barrier to be up against the inherent heroization and dehumanization. There is data that most people who rape kids are themselves child sexual abuse survivors. They're not monsters. I say it in my keynotes, it's effective if you want to get an audience's attention to remind them, "When was the last time you went to a baby shower and the baby was going to be born a rapist?" Zero times. Babies are not born rapists.

This world shapes people into having experiences that sometimes lead them to make bad and cruel choices. Data shows that most child sexual abuse survivors don't go on to re-offend. But you can [only] study a small pool of people because most people who rape kids don't get incarcerated for it.

If we just had a magic time machine and went back to that moment when they were harmed as kids, and if we as a community and a society could have protected them from getting hurt, or helped them be believed and get away from the people who were hurting them, have healing resources, and nourish their limbic system. My dad is a child sexual abuse survivor, and then he became my rapist. He made choices—and I'm not absolving him from consequences—but he's not a monster. He was a five-year-old boy who got raped and what happened to him was not

right. If we want to end child sexual abuse, we have to sit with that complexity. The people unwilling to do that, who are themselves non-offending survivors, are sometimes a barrier.

Lissa Harris: Is shifting cultural norms part of your work? And what are the most effective strategies to get at cultural view shift?

Amita Swadhin: Yes. Our work is first and foremost about narrative change and cultural change. Stories are effective, that's why we have an audio archive. Our theater project is the most effective thing we've produced because people fear this issue. Not everyone will click into an audio archive with survivor stories, but people are socialized to go to the theater, the movies, watch TV, or an art exhibit. I learned that from Secret Survivors 15 years ago, when we performed the theater project only a few times for an audience of a maximum of 400 people, but that's a lot for a show of five adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

You have to meet people where they're at in how they consume storytelling. That's why we have a theater project in Mirror Memoirs, and we filmed it, and why we're interested in collaborating to do art exhibits as the archive opens. Our next step, because we're headquartered in Los Angeles, is to do training for people in the entertainment industry. There are some great foundations already using that modality. Pop Culture Collaborative comes to mind. We want to get the learnings from our archive and our membership base into the hands of Hollywood to responsibly tell the stories of child sexual abuse survivors because it's been pretty egregiously handled in that industry for a long time, and it doesn't have to be that way.

Lissa Harris: Who are your main partners and how do you cultivate and maintain partnerships in this work?

Amita Swadhin: We are part of some formal policy advocacy coalitions. My co-director, Jaden Fields was a Solis Policy fellow at the Women's Foundation of California. He helped pass the Justice for Survivors Act in California, which now gives judges the option during sentencing to take a sentence's trauma history into account. Even though we're abolitionists, we believe in harm reduction through the policy and legislative system. If we're keeping people out of jail or lessening their sentences, that's a win.

We're part of the California Transgender Gender Nonconforming Intersex Policy Alliance. Jaden represents our policy work and we are one of the founding members. Together with that coalition, we helped create the TGNCI, Transgender Gender Nonconforming Intersex Wellness

Fund, a $12 to $13 million fund from the state of California to fund grassroots initiatives around our community's wellness.

We're trying to get one at the LA County level as well. A lot of the policy work we do is about taking money out of the budget for policing and prisons and putting it into those kinds of healing and resourcing our community's strategies. We have referendums in California during elections, so there was an attempt to get something on a referendum from the upcoming election that would have forced teachers to call a parent if their student started using a different name in class. So basically to out trans kids to their parents, and a coalition was formed against that to monitor that initiative. Thankfully, they didn't get on the ballot.

Currently, hospital workers are mandated reporters to call the police if they suspect abuse. We're working to get legislation passed to end that practice and to empower hospital workers to make referrals to services without involving the police. There's precedent for that. Connecticut has passed legislation for survivors to go to a direct service provider, like a rape crisis center, and make a report and get free therapy and care without having to report to the police or prosecuting their perpetrators.

Some other organizations are survivor-led in a similar praxis to ours. We are close partners with the HEAL Project led by Ignacio Rivera which does a lot of education and training around body autonomy and how to break that cycle with your children. We are close partners with the Ahimsa Collective run by Sonya Shah in California. We visited prisons with their staff, and hopefully, again next year to be storytellers with incarcerated men for things like child sexual abuse.

I know what it feels like to see the data come to life when men who are incarcerated for raping kids are also survivors of that violence. I was in a circle with them twice, and it was humbling because I wanted to hate them but I walked away from an eight-hour day together realizing I had more in common with them than with my partner who's not a child sexual abuse survivor. It's hard to hold that, but that's true.

Aishah Shahidah-Simmons, who wrote the anthology Love WITH Accountability is getting a great award at the Ford Foundation for her giant body of work in this field this week, she is our partner. And our funders are often our partners as well.

Lissa Harris: Is there a strategy you use to guide who you partner with and how? Where do you look for the overlaps in what you do?

Amita Swadhin: We do a lot of work with our people in the core membership demographic, who are organizational leaders of their projects. It's an easy way for us to partner programmatically. On the next tier, we will partner with people who are much bigger infrastructure organizations than ours, on certain policy initiatives or we'll train their staff or board, like Futures Without Violence. We ensure that people working with survivors on a much bigger scale are hopefully learning from us and not doing harm.

And then the third ring is around philanthropy. We want people who hold the purse strings to better understand this issue. We [have been] told that we don't fit into the portfolios. [To my knowledge, there are only] four funders in the United States that have specific grant-making programs around ending child sexual abuse. It was sad and laughable to have reproductive justice and public health funders say to our faces, "You don't fit." We had to help them understand the data and the connections that were there for years.

The ACE [Adverse Childhood Experiences] study is mainstream, and it tells us we're more at risk [of childhood sexual abuse] then for rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, lung disease, and fibromyalgia. How can you tell me that this is not a public health issue, not to mention the mental health consequences? We do a lot of that work and we partner with funder collaboratives who educate their philanthropic members through national conferences.

It helps us with our strategic goal of making sure the people who come after Mirror Memoirs when this container has closed, because we won't be around forever, that they have a pool of funding available in a way that we didn't 10 years ago.

Lissa Harris: What do you think of the broad lessons that can be taken from your work, that others who follow in your footsteps can learn from?

Amita Swadhin: Number one, cycles can be broken. It's not an inevitability that child sexual abuse has to continue forever. Number two, this is not an individual experience. Child sexual abuse is both a weapon and a symptom of systemic violence. Number three, you can't end child sexual abuse without an intersectional praxis. I've learned a lot from queer Black feminists, the Combahee River Collective, Dr. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw. What these women are talking about is we will continue to leave survivors behind, unless we start with the survivors who are living at the intersections of multiple oppressed identities and experiences.

And number four, when you listen to those stories, what gets illuminated is the state as a site of violence and we have to think beyond that. And there are, as Mariame Kaba says, a million little

experiments that are not happening in a way that is valued or uplifted by well-resourced organizations, and that needs to change.

Lissa Harris: What do you think is most needed by other actors to advance the change you want to see? Whether that's philanthropists, policymakers, or big NGOs in adjacent fields.

Amita Swadhin: I had to learn to de-center myself. I can be critical of the machine that creates heroes because I was put onto that treadmill pretty young. I went to the School of Foreign Service at 17 on a scholarship after having been raped as a child my almost whole life. I was given a speech writer internship for the [Office of] Violence Against Women Director at age 18. I'm grateful for that. But am I the person everyone should have been listening to when the Combahee River Collective had already published this giant body of work and when the scholars who founded Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence were already doing this work?

We have to be careful when we platform people because it's easy to tokenize those who have a good heart and want to do the right thing but don't have a systemic analysis. We have to be listening to people who live at the intersections of oppression, who also have done rigorous scholarship and learning around having a systemic critique. When we follow the leadership of those folks, the entire strategy for this entire movement inherently has to change.

Lissa Harris: What do you think has the potential to make an impact on the field in the next five years? Are there any key leverage points for action that you can foresee?

Amita Swadhin: Money is really important, and I don't think it's being invested in the right place right now. There's no shortage of government funds or philanthropic funds. People are afraid to fund projects that are overtly saying they're anti-imperial, anti-prison and police, and pro-ending child sexual abuse. That could change in the next five years easily.

And people want evidence-based things. And my question is through what? An Institutional Review Board (IRB) study or through generations of lived experience of grassroots communities? I would love to see that change right now.

Lissa Harris: How do you envision a justice system that prioritizes the needs of survivors and communities, and without feeding impunity for child sexual assault? What needs to shift in our justice system for it to serve the needs of children and the needs of communities, particularly communities of color that are most harmed?

Amita Swadhin: I don't believe in courts or prisons or police so I'll reframe that question and say that one place I think a government institution could do good is the education system. I used to run an LA chapter of a national youth health organization called Peer Health Exchange (PHE), a model to train college students to present health workshops in ninth-grade classes. The state education code requires rigorous health education, but [often] the district has not funded a health teacher. They're out of compliance with the [the law].

The [PHE] curriculum has been [used] by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), for example. And I'm using LAUSD because it's where I lived at the time, [and] it's the second-largest school district in the country. That curriculum included how to prevent peer-to-peer rape and sexual assault. It included a curriculum on understanding a healthy relationship versus an abusive relationship around teen dating violence. It included the signs of suicidal ideation and what to do if you notice signs of suicidal ideation in your best friends or they disclose it to you. It included signs of an eating disorder. It included signs of depression. It included drugs and alcohol, and how to make healthy decisions at a party like don't take drinks that didn't have a cover.

The government could get braver about talking to ninth graders about this reality [the endemic nature of child sexual abuse] as a public health issue. I think of myself as a 13-year-old in ninth grade. I was the salutatorian of my school. I did the morning announcements. I was co-editor-in-chief of the school newspaper and co-captain of the debate team and you know this kid. A lot of us were this kid. But I thought that I was the only one in that entire town who was being raped at home. And then I grew up to be a researcher, and I was like, "What?" I have to look back at that town and [consider that] roughly 20% of my classmates were also going through that, and none of us knew. Shame on those adults.

I don't believe courts help children, but we can teach communities how to make interventions. I don't think it means family should stay together. My family should have broken up. I'm glad that my dad's not in my life anymore. But I don't think what the state offered me was helpful. If my mother's community had said, "Yeah, we believe you. Let's get you away from him, and give you a safe home, resources, and therapy. We're here for you. Let's listen to your stories and keep him away." Communities have known how to protect each other for a long time, particularly communities that could never rely on the police.

Lissa Harris: Thank you so much for talking with me today.

Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter, science writer (MIT '08), and former local news entrepreneur based in upstate New York. She is currently working as a consultant on capacity-building and local solutions-oriented community projects in the rural Catskills.

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***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*