“We have to move from awareness to action”: Tarana Burke of #MeToo on changing narratives, building movements, and centering survivors’ voices in solutions

Lissa Harris
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Lissa Harris: Could you introduce yourself, describe the problem you're addressing, and introduce your organization?

Tarana Burke: My name is Tarana Burke. I'm the founder of the #MeToo movement and chief vision officer at MeToo International. I describe our work as “healing in action,” which focuses on four areas: thought leadership, organizing, supporting survivors, and global engagement.

When #MeToo went viral, it shifted from being community-based to a larger narrative force, which I couldn’t have imagined coming from an organizing background. Over the last seven years, I've seen my strategy shift.

Originally, I focused on organizing survivors, but now, I feel like this overall strategy is about multiple interventions, and one of those interventions is narrative. People just don't understand the breadth and depth of what sexual violence is, what it does, and how it affects our material lives, both the lives of survivors and non-survivors.

We have a generation raised on 25 years of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, which is great, but not a full picture. It has done a lot to shape the narrative around sexual violence in a good way, and it has kept it in the conversation, but in a very theatrical way. There are still pieces missing. And it doesn't speak to solutions. It speaks to immediate reaction and disruption. We can't get to solutions without a strategy that involves shifting our narratives.

#MeToo was introduced to the world through sexual harassment of famous people, with a focus on adult women in particular. One of the narrative challenges we've had is getting people to see that this is a movement about all forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

In terms of solvability, one of the major issues is a cultural issue. We see sexual violence, particularly child sexual abuse (CSA), in poor communities, across the board. But we see it as a foregone conclusion, a fact of life, a thing that happens, a terrible thing, a sad thing, an unfortunate thing, but we don't see it as a public health crisis or as a social justice issue.

To really interrupt this we have to get into the realm of poverty, economics, and education, recognize it as a social justice movement, and understand the interconnectedness.

Lissa Harris: Could you sum up the problem that the #MeToo movement and your work within it is seeking to address?

Tarana Burke: We are trying to dismantle the systems, institutions, and cultural norms that allow for the proliferation of sexual and gender-based violence.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk about your intended audience(s)? What are your communication strategies? How do you bring attention to the issue?

Tarana Burke: I initially thought my audience had to be just survivors. We have to organize ourselves because we are the ones who have the answers and are most passionate and connected to the idea of moving this issue forward. I still believe that and I also believe there will be survivor leaders, survivor activists, and survivors who are just not interested in doing any of that work. They don't have to be; their job is just to survive. But, if given the proper motivation or information, they could vote like a survivor. They could donate and share. There are low lifts that can be involved in organizing people.

Outside of that, if you're not a survivor, you know a survivor; that's guaranteed. We should live in a world where everyone has equal access to their dignity and their bodily autonomy. I want that world for myself and for my children.

If you're going to fight against gun violence, or for the environment, this should be right there alongside those issues. What's happened historically is that sexual violence has been the pity party. It hasn't been seen as a powerful place or a place to build power. It's been more like, “Oh my gosh, those poor survivors. We should make sure they have services.” In the United States, specifically, it’s “What can we do for them?” rather than “How can they be a peer and a partner in the fight for social justice and human rights?”

My friend Joanne Smith runs this amazing organization out of Brooklyn, Girls for Gender Equity. She says: “We come to the work because we are the work.” That quote defines my existence in this space. This is what I want to do because I have such a deep and visceral understanding of what those experiences did to my life. The other part of me, and maybe it's utopic, wants to see other children be free of that and wants to see other people shed whatever it leaves you with.

We have such a narrow definition of social justice and even human rights. Healing is a human right, it's also activism. Our movement is not different from other movements. It's not. Of course, you can't quantify the wins in the same way. We're not going to all be marching through the streets. Yet while this country ignores survivorship, a new survivor is created every 68 seconds. When you have people who acknowledge the harm, tap into the harm, heal themselves, and try to find their way back to some sort of normalcy, that is activism. That is a big part of our movement.

#MeToo went viral, first of all, because celebrities and tons and tons of people—I would venture to say in the millions—said, “Me too.” They were survivors of CSA, including myself. Yet that never gets talked about. We need to find solutions to stop it, and those solutions are going to be found by those of us who survived it.

We number in the millions, unfortunately. And so many of us have been trying to understand what to do with our bodies and ourselves. Others have found community and have been thinking about it in collective spaces. Organizing is about recognizing that acknowledgment and community building are powerful.

Lissa Harris: What makes your approach distinct from other organizations working in a similar space? What makes you unique?

Tarana Burke: The sense of healing is in everything we do. We come into every situation with the presumption that people are survivors. If we’re in a room of 100 people, we’ll assume 75 of them are survivors of something. So we center healing as an ethic. It feels unethical to ask people to

put their bodies on the line again, even if it's for their rights, without offering them space for what we call post-traumatic growth. We know people are living with a lot of post-traumatic stress. It makes us move slower because we refuse to move any piece of this puzzle without ensuring that healing comes with it.

We center survivors deeply. I probably say that word 20 to 25 times a day, yet nobody really thinks about us. We're brought out to share stories to make people feel emotions, but it becomes trauma porn for policies that rarely pass.

Lissa Harris: People love telling gruesome stories, but you solve problems. It's different.

Tarana Burke: They don't want to get into that part. I have another quote, from another friend of mine, Doctor Imani Perry. She has this amazing quote in her book, *Breathe*: "Awareness in and of itself is not a virtue without a moral imperative." It's so perfect. We don't need more awareness. I've just learned about some horrific practices around child marriage and sexual violence in Argentina that I'd never heard of before. There's always going to be some new horrific surface thing. But generally, y'all know that, so you don't need our stories of trauma anymore. We have to move from awareness to action. Which is why I was very excited to participate in this because solutions are all I want to talk about.

I'm a geek around data. I'm always reading reports because I'm working on the framing around solvability. I was looking at the countries that have the lowest rates of sexual and gender-based violence and trying to understand why. The countries are Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Canada. They tend to have stronger legal frameworks.

Lissa Harris: Do you think that data is solid in showing that they have lower rates? Because that's tough, right?

Tarana Burke: It's a first run. I found articles citing Norway has made significant strides in addressing sexual violence but, like many countries, continues to face challenges. It talks about the prevalence, the legal action, and the support systems legislation. There needs to be a deeper, more comprehensive, well-resourced dive into what's working in places that have low instances of sexual violence across the country. Their community programs are similar to the anti-gun violence programs in places like New York, New Orleans, and Chicago, where community members took it upon themselves to keep their communities safe by organizing peace walks and interventions.

That's also how our work started. I began taking girls in my program who I knew had experienced CSA. There was a junior high school program in the school where girls were revealing themselves as survivors, or as currently living in violent situations. I gathered them to provide a safe space and support. There are many of those programs around the country. Which of them are working? How are they scalable? Nobody's digging into that.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example in your work that illustrates the impact of what you do? For instance, how do you know that your work is working? Is there a story that you like to tell?

Tarana Burke: We did an impact report last year and I was jazzed about how language around survivor justice has shifted since 2017. Large national organizations like Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network [RAINN] now use "healing" in their mission, something we may have influenced through our media guide that says, don't say victim, say survivor instead. We've witnessed survivor language move into the mainstream.

At #MeToo's fifth anniversary, we shifted the media narrative to focus on what we've made possible, like laws that changed and survivors who have been empowered to come forward. We got them to see victories or wins differently, beyond "Weinstein went to jail."

Our Survivors Vote campaign is another way to count. It aims to organize survivors as a voting bloc, inspired by the anchor organizations and Survivors Agenda, our US network. We revived this election cycle as Survivors Vote. It's so different and so much better. It is a part of that strategy of multiple interventions.

Survivors need a political home, commitment, resources, and intentional focus, like what we see in the gun violence or the environmental movements. They have cycles of donors and influencers who are committed and people who feel that this is their issue, who will tie themselves to a tree, or take off school. In Latin America, women come together around issues of sexual and gender-based violence and organize around that, but the US has never organized that way.

We have a narrative campaign coming up aimed at Black men, addressing the perception that #MeToo is against Black men. Many men are survivors of CSA, and One in Six is the only national organization I know that is about male survivors of CSA. Anthony Edwards, the actor from *ER*, is one of their national spokespersons. We reached out with a letter on Valentine's Day this year that said, "Hey, we haven't done a great job of reaching out to you. We get that, but we do see you, and we're here." It was well received. We continue with a Public Service

Announcement (PSA) series coming out this Black History Month that is aimed at both men and women. One for the adultification of Black girls, and the other for men and boys to find the conversation.

Looking ahead, a larger cultural intervention is essential. By 2027, #MeToo's 10th anniversary, we aim to do a big narrative campaign focusing on solvability. I don't think we get to solutions simply by talking to each other. Inside the movement, we talk to each other a lot. We need that sense of community because we're the only ones who get each other. But what I wouldn't have recognized without the viral moment, that I represent the celebrity for survivors, which is something we've never had before. There's never been a person who's on mainstream television or news, saying, "This matters."

We've seen these big, successful campaigns around HIV/AIDS and tobacco. I use tobacco as an example all the time. We talked to the folks at Bloomberg because they shared some of their research and methodology. Bloomberg committed to making New York and America tobacco-free 20/25 years ago. They spent $25 billion to make that happen. This is where my multiple interventions theory comes from. It took a concerted effort of cultural interventions to get us from the Marlboro man to now. They took cigarette smoking off of television and movies. All of that was undergirded by a commitment from philanthropy, from very rich people.

Bloomberg didn't just say he was going to get tobacco out of schools; he said he wanted this to be a smoke-free country. It's taken 20-something years, but we've gotten very far. The point I'm trying to make around solvability is getting people to ask, "What will our country look like in 2050, regarding consent?"

Education from kindergarten to 12th grade, and taking egregious sexual violence off of television and movies, could be a start. I'm not about censorship. But if this act of violence does not advance this story in a particular way, why do we need it? We're trying to create a rubric for that.

We need language that says, "We are going to solve sexual violence. Period. We're going to end it." That happens after we get the philanthropists and the politicians under a single narrative that says, "This can end." I've been saying we need to end sexual violence for years, and people often suggest I use language like "disrupt." No. My legacy will be that this human being did everything in her power to push that boulder as far up the hill as possible and not pass a torch.

Lissa Harris: We learn as much from things that don't work as things that do. Could you describe something that you tried, and that taught you an important lesson? And what are the main challenges and the broad barriers to your work that you are still working to overcome?

Tarana Burke: Narrative, and people's lack of understanding of what sexual violence is, what it does to an individual, how it lives and lingers inside our bodies and our minds. People don't have an actual real understanding of that.

I would say, with some caution, that sometimes, because of the ways we have to survive—which in some cases is in complete denial—even people who have had the experience are not tapped into how profound the effects are. The information exists, but there is a lack of mainstreaming about the health disparities and health problems that come from it, both mental and physical, and that is a big barrier.

This is not a women's movement, but we are very much aligned with women's movements. I believe deeply in the idea of women being empowered and being in their power. If we want to build powerful women, we have to build safety at the same time, at the same pace, with the same fervor. That lack of understanding is a barrier to our work because people see us as survivor justice and think we're doing a great thing, but they don't resource or amplify it. When something else comes along, they think, "We've got to do this," as opposed to wondering how these two things are connected.

Lissa Harris: Could you talk about strategies for shifting cultural norms? What strategies do you think are effective in changing people's and society's view of this problem?

Tarana Burke: We have to reeducate and be reeducated. We need to start with children and get curriculum into schools, but also– and I hate to use this word because of the state of our country– we need to build a base for morality around consent, boundaries, respect, and bodily autonomy. The way we shift culture is to embed it in how we raise and teach our children.

Lissa Harris: Are there specific examples of this in action that you can point to?

Tarana Burke: We've seen this in the LGBTQ community. Anecdotally, I can share that my child is queer and uses they/them pronouns. When they shifted, my nephews were like, "Why are you not she? You're a girl." My daughter had to explain that she isn't a girl, but is nonbinary. They wanted to know what that was, and we explained he, she, and they, and then all they wanted to know was whether they were still their cousin.

I think that we have seen an embracing amongst children around these things. In progressive schools, they embrace pronouns and identity, and the children get it. And these are everyday kids. They're correcting their parents, saying, mom, that's a trans person. That shift can happen around CSA, it's in the same bucket. We should teach respect for people's identities, pronouns, and bodies. This is all aligned. When talking about bodily autonomy, it's not just about reproductive rights. It's about the right to live in your body however you please.

Lissa Harris: What role do partnerships or coalitions play in pushing your work forward? Who are your main partners, and how do you cultivate and maintain those relationships?

Tarana Burke: Partnerships are paramount to this work. How I look at partnerships is based on what I've been saying about how everyday people need to embrace this as an issue that can be fought, not just as something to accept and then do something about it after the fact. Some other organizations and movements have achieved that shift, like the gun violence movement. People are clear that we need to do something about guns now to prevent more violence later.

Statistics show that many of the mass shooters and people who commit acts of violence have a history of sexual and gender-based violence. We try to find those points of intersection because the reality is, sexual violence lives inside of so many social justice issues. We've done work with folks in the climate world. We've done work with folks in gun violence and in LGBTQ spaces. We are open to partnerships anywhere we can find alliances.

At the end of the day, we are fighting the same demons. These are systems of oppression that have been formed around power and privilege, and they deny all of us basic human rights and human dignity. There are sexual violence issues, homelessness, food insecurity, and issues related to economic justice, deep inequality, and capitalism that we could be aligned on because those things affect all of us.

We work closely with the National Women's Law Center. They cover an array of issues that affect women around justice, but we also work with a national sex workers organization and with BIPOC Collective, which is about advancing the human rights of sex workers. We just did a campaign with Black Voters Matter, where we joined them on the road as they went out to talk to voters, so we could bring the voter guide that we created to help voters understand this issue as a political issue. Black people are so adversely affected by sexual violence, and Black Voters Matters is about advancing things that adversely affect our community, so it fits.

Lissa Harris: What are the insights or big lessons that can be taken from your work that other people working on similar issues could learn from? What advice do you give to people who are trying to recreate the successes you've had?

Tarana Burke: First, look for partnerships and alliances wherever possible. No single organization will solve all our problems; we need each other.

We need to overcome the culture of competition created by philanthropy and find ways to work together and new avenues to resources together. We all need to talk to each other and talk to different people, especially people who aren't one-to-one aligned with what we're doing. Find that shared drive for success, and genuine interest in what others are doing.

I have so much visibility, that I've gotten a lot of "you shoulds," and "you're missing these opportunities." I built an organization and created a container for my vision, so it didn't get swallowed up in all these other people's visions or ideas. There has to be a focus and somebody committed to advocating for healing, for survivors, for Black and Brown people, and for Indigenous folks. Those words have to be spoken, let people say what they're going to say. Trust in your vision.

The work doesn't have to be on a massive scale. People often ask me how to build a global movement, as if there's a manual. I did envision building a movement because I know that movements require groups of people to come together to organize around a collective issue. If #MeToo never went viral, I would still have my little black and pink t-shirts, and I would still be organizing in communities and talking to parents because that was impactful.

It always bothers me when I talk to journalists and they ask what it's like since #MeToo has become successful. I was quite successful before this. We touched hundreds of children's and parents' and people's lives. What you're doing doesn't have to be on the cover of magazines. It needs to be thoughtful, impactful, and committed. I told journalists in the last seven years: "Please tell different stories." When they ask about the call to action, I say, "Tell a different story from the Weinstein story. Look for something inside of that. Be curious." There's so much more to tell than what we keep hearing over and over.

Lissa Harris: What do you think is most needed from other actors, partners, or entities to make this change happen?

Tarana Burke: I think people need to be open to collaboration—and I hope this doesn't sound like I'm contradicting what I said before, because I think you should believe in your vision—and I also

think we have to be open to alterations and additions to our visions. My biggest hope is that there's some 22-year-old who is just obsessive about this, who's read everything, knows every single thing about me, knows our framework in and out, and says, “Ha, they forgot something. They didn't get this right.” Or, “This works now, but I can see that it won't work in ten years.” And they’re feverishly working on how to make it better. I think people who are in this work need to constantly be thinking about what's next, and how we can bring in more people who are better than us, and who are just as committed.

Deep collaboration is important, and so is respecting burnout. This is difficult work, and most of us are survivors. What I've seen challenge people a lot in this survivor justice work is people who are clearly at the end of their rope, or just need to take a step back. I get it. I've been that person, which is why I can give that advice. There is healing in action, but there's also action in healing.

Lissa Harris: What do you think has the potential to make a significant impact on this issue in the next five years? Are there things coming toward us that you see as leverage points for action or inflection points?

Tarana Burke: I'm hoping one of them is the 10th anniversary of collective action and organization, and that we can use that as we did the fifth anniversary, to say: “You don't get to define this moment. We do.”

There is an opportunity in philanthropy, we are in a moment that we've never seen before, where some of the most powerful and prominent philanthropists of the moment are progressive women. We need a come to Jesus moment in philanthropy, where people decide to pool their efforts and do what Bloomberg did, which is to say, “We're going to solve this. We're going to make a 30-year commitment and we're going to solve this.” I look at people like Bill Gates, who was just like, we're going to solve malaria. No biggie. It's been around forever, and it’s affecting a whole continent and more, but he said it, and he poured the resources into it.

Similarly, with HIV/AIDS, the cultural thinking shifted. The stigma around HIV/AIDS was so bad, we couldn't talk about it. We couldn't think about it. Those people were lepers. Then it shifted to, “We're going to get to zero. We're going to solve this.” There was a shift in how we talked about, thought about, and engaged with the issue of HIV/AIDS.

Lissa Harris: That was mostly survivor-led because it was unacceptable to talk about, so there's a similarity.

Tarana Burke: Yes. The film *Philadelphia* was a big turning point culturally. We'd never had a movie that humanized the experience of survivors, of people living with HIV/AIDS. There needs to be deep cultural work happening for that shift to occur, and I think that's the opportunity in the next five years. There's an opportunity for philanthropy to recognize that we've got to stop just saying women's empowerment as a big, general field and understand that the health and wellbeing of the world depends on the health and wellbeing of women and girls. Half a billion women and girls in this world are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Lissa Harris: What would it take, do you think, to move that needle and get more groups who are not currently owning this problem, whether NGO's, governments, schools, institutions, or professional societies, to own it?

Tarana Burke: It's twofold, it's narrative shift and organizing. We need a public conversation that creates a shared understanding of the issue, and unity within the movement itself. People don't think child sexual abuse is included in sexual violence.

When we say we want to put an end to sexual and gender-based violence, we mean all of it - trafficking, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, rape on campus. People can pick what their issue is, but there has to be an overarching narrative and language that unites the issues. It helps other organizations and even lay people, see themselves in it. We need philanthropy, journalism, and the government to see the whole thing and commit to ending it.

What we're doing now is so segmented and the messaging is disjointed. We need more unification across the field, across the movement, coupled with narrative language that shows people have roles to play inside of that.

Cultural shifts and narrative change require daily efforts from everyone, not just survivors.

Lissa Harris: We have covered so much ground today, and I want to thank you for being so generous with your time. It's been wonderful. Is there anything that we didn't cover that you thought was important to touch on before we wrap up?

Tarana Burke: One thing we haven't discussed is that to get to solutions, the United States must acknowledge that this is a global issue and that we're part of the globe. We don't bring more solutions than others to this conversation but the US has an arrogant positioning around this, especially among government officials, which makes it difficult for us to go global and partner with others. We need to humbly ask, "How can we replicate what's working elsewhere?" Effective solutions must be global, and the US should enter that conversation with humility.

I'll end by sharing that I was at the UN Advocacy, Coalition Building, and Transformative Feminist Action (ACT) Programme to End Violence Against Women, and I noticed a different energy. After years in this space, people are fed up; they want action, not just talk. There's a shared urgency to make real progress. People are ready to move, and the beautiful thing is that we're finding each other, and finding some ways to connect, share, and maybe collaborate. That's going to be a game-changer.

Lissa Harris: That's fantastic. Thank you for being part of this conversation.

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.

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