“The culture of silence around this issue is a huge challenge in terms of implementation”: Yusra Shawar of John Hopkins University on stigma, issue framing, and improving implementation to end child sexual violence.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Please introduce yourself and give an overview of what your work entails.

Yusra Shawar: My name is Yusra Shawa and I am an associate research professor at Johns Hopkins University. My primary faculty appointment is in the Bloomberg School of Public Health and I also have a courtesy appointment at the School of Advanced International Studies. My work is primarily on the politics of health policymaking in low and middle-income countries, but also in the politics of global health governance. I look primarily at power dynamics, how they are shaped, how policy is formulated and implemented. My research is around agenda setting and health policy, but also increasingly in social policy and work around violence against children.

Sexual violence against children has increasingly become an area of my focus. Primarily, I'm interested in understanding why particular health issues, or in the case of child protection wise, certain issues around child sexual violence and other related issues get prioritized or not on national and global agendas. Primarily looking at the actors involved, like the nature of these actors and oftentimes their own challenges, and how they navigate policy and political environments to advance their causes.

Rollo Romig: Can you give me an example of a specific project you have worked on or that you are working on currently?

Yusra Shawar: Most applicable to what you're interested in is an Oak-funded project. We have a whole team of researchers, but Jeremy Shiffman is the PI [principal investigator] and I'm co-PI on a project that looks at the political factors that shape governance for addressing child sexual abuse. We're looking at five different countries: Bolivia, South Africa, Germany, Chile, and the United Arab Emirates. These countries have made some significant progress in their own rights on addressing this issue [and] we're trying to understand the pathways [by which] each of these contexts have advanced progress on these issues. Looking at the upstream factors, what advocates in each of these countries did, and also some of the challenges that they've encountered on the implementation side.

The reality is actually no country has made [a lot of] progress on this issue. But, I would say in the last decade, each of these countries have made progress that is worth studying for other countries and advocates to learn from.

Rollo Romig: I think it would be helpful to break that down country by country. And maybe tell me a little bit about those five countries. What progress have you observed in these countries and what do you think got them there?

Yusra Shawar: This project is ongoing, so I don't want to jump the gun too much in terms of what we're finding. But a somewhat similar project that I could speak more fully to, because that paper is out, is around the UK. There we looked at a similar question around what drove the priority for addressing child sexual abuse there.

If I could speak broadly to a lot of these countries, there are a couple of elements that stick out. One theme across all countries is around domestic scandals that happen that usually raise the profile of the issue and bring attention to either the severity of the problem, its prevalence, or the failure of the institutions or systems set up to try to address these. That's one element I think that usually drives some initial attention to the issue. It's the policy window, but oftentimes too, coupled with that in the background, are people who've been working for many years—researchers collecting data on the issue, advocates, or others who have been building institutions or mechanisms to try to address the issue. They built this toolkit, so when these policy windows happen, they're there to present solutions and ideas to policymakers about what can be potentially done.

There's also the political or the bureaucratic leadership, you'll find people high up in government systems who have a personal connection to the issue. That is often also part of the story. Those are just some of the elements that we've seen emerge across many of the countries.

Rollo Romig: When it comes to domestic scandals, does it tend to take the form of an institutional scandal that gets in the news or what form does that usually take?

Yusra Shawar: In the UK, the Jimmy Savile case was a huge one. I think there, the nature of the scandal and the perpetrator were huge elements in this story. And that's the thing, scandals happen all the time, but only some rise to actually start to push momentum and truly form a policy window. In the case of Jimmy Savile, it was a beloved household name that people trusted. And the perpetration happened in government institutions and hospitals. [People wondered], "How could this have happened under our nose?"

The third element is who it was perpetrated against. It was particularly vulnerable children who were in the hospitals that he was visiting. It was this combination [of factors combined] with the failure of institutions to catch it. It was right under their nose, happening for so long. That's an example of how a scandal can shake a country to want to rise up and [demand accountability]. In many countries, the media plays a large role in shining light on the issue.

Rollo Romig: In the absence of a scandal of that scale, what are some other techniques for bringing attention to the problem and mobilizing public attention and alarm?

Yusra Shawar: When you look at a story [like this] from the outside, we give causal attention to the Savile case, but the reality is that in the decades leading up to it, there was a civil society, there were foundations and institutions and advocates who were working in the background. There were hotlines set up prior to this scandal. People were gathering data, which is one aspect. Building institutions and infrastructure is another.

Figuring out what works is another. Politicians want to know what the solutions are, and during a scandal they are more open to hearing from experts. So having solutions top of mind; that they know that have been evaluated and can be trusted. [That] these are [the solutions] that make the most sense.

Rollo Romig: You alluded earlier to the idea of a toolkit. Do these tactics and strategies differ from place to place, from one cultural context to another? Or is there a universal toolkit that could work across contexts?

Yusra Shawar: Each context, from what I've seen, emphasizes different tools more than the other. In certain countries, there's a big focus on online child sexual perpetration versus the more familial or the familiar child sexual abuse. So, there's a lot of initiatives more on the technology side, and so on and so forth. There are certain societies that I think are more open to and have done a lot more work on the interventions for the perpetrator themselves, so pedophiles and so on and so forth in therapy and building up support systems for that target group. Whereas in other societies, that's not as acceptable or as emphasized as mainstream. So from that more broader perspective, you see different kinds of ideas about what works.

Rollo Romig: That's interesting. So it's not just about what's effective, it's about what's culturally acceptable as an approach too.

Yusra Shawar: Yes, exactly. And then you have a different emphasis on prevention versus the intervention or reacting versus the more justice redress aspect of it. And you see societies and advocates themselves, while obviously acknowledging that all aspects of this are important, will tend to emphasize one over the other in terms of their work or what they're advancing.

Rollo Romig: Is your work primarily focused on studying implementation, or does your work involve actually being involved in implementation of solutions yourself?

Yusra Shawar: My work is more around studying implementation. So looking at what works. I would actually characterize it as being more about what's shaping implementation—the factors that drive effective implementation or cause differences. Laws and policies are designed in a particular way and they're often not implemented in the way that they were initially intended. So what's shaped that? What's driven that? Who are the actors involved?

Rollo Romig: Could you tell me about some patterns that you've noticed in terms of what shapes implementation?

Yusra Shawar: Specifically in regards to this work around child sexual abuse policy, the extent to which actors coordinate with one another and the power of those actors who are involved. At a governmental level, who are the ministries that are involved and how much power do they actually have often shapes policy because whether they have the adequate funding or accountability mechanisms or power to push through certain ideas is a big part of this, and then, as I said, coordination. This is an issue that crosses many sectors, many different actors.

One big dynamic that shapes implementation is the extent to which all of these actors actually are on the same page and working together; they don't have tensions about the strategy or how it's going to be implemented. You could also think about the street-level bureaucrats themselves, the workforce, the social workers that are on the ground, their own motivations, their level of training, how they think about the target groups that they're interacting with, that shapes implementation greatly. The stigmas about how we think about the perpetrators, how we think about children who come forward, and even how societies think about children in general and their voices and the extent of voice and agency that they have in these processes. Those are some of the big ones that shape implementation.

Data and mechanisms to capture the nature of the problem—if there is a mechanism to evaluate these programs or policies that are coming through—is oftentimes very limited, especially in resource-constrained settings. What I have noticed is that there's actually a lot of really good policy around addressing child protection issues more broadly. I think states and governments can put out really beautiful language, but a lot of the challenge comes with implementing, so actually the politics of allocating sufficient budgets. There's often, especially in federal societies, [bureaucracy] between the federal level and state level [about] who is funding what.

Rollo Romig: This question of sometimes there are excellent laws on the books that on paper do exactly what you'd want them to do, but maybe they're not being enforced or implemented fully or effectively. What are some of the roadblocks to that?

Yusra Shawar: Imagine you have a good law, but then you just don't have the number of social workers that you need to actually implement it. Or you have plenty of social workers, but none of them are trained or understand how to interact with a child in a particular situation. And oftentimes there's such high turnover or low morale. That's an example of how you could have a perfect law about how social workers are supposed to implement a particular thing. I've seen instances where there are good laws, but there's not sufficient funding behind them.

It's great that [the law is] there, but the amount that was earmarked for it would not sufficiently address what it's seeking to do. Or, on the coordination aspect, sometimes there are directives that come, but the reality is many of these sectors and ministries work in silos. And so it's everyone's problem, but nobody's responsibility, so nothing gets done.

Rollo Romig: Sexual violence against children is typically happening in secret behind closed doors. It can be taboo to talk about and you've got that added barrier of secrecy and privacy. How have you observed different communities tackling that aspect?

Yusra Shawar: The culture of silence around this issue is a huge challenge in terms of implementation because even if you have services and support systems, the stigma can actually hinder a child or the family from coming forward.

In terms of how have I seen societies deal with this? I think it's been very difficult. But I will say there are some positive examples. For example, in Germany they've institutionalized a Survivors Council in the government. When you have institutions like this that are part of your government where survivors have a voice, surely that has a big impact on society in terms of acceptance. If you're giving institutional agency and support to survivors within your own government, that says a lot. That's one example where I think the tide is shifting.

Rollo Romig: Even just to send a message that this can be publicly discussed.

Yusra Shawar: Yes, and not only publicly discussed, but it also shows that we value their voice enough [to have them serve as] an advisor to our government. Germany has done a lot in that case. They have an independent commissioner that's dedicated to child sexual abuse, the Survivors Council. So they've done a lot in that respect and I think that's had a really positive impact on societal awareness and combating the stigma around child sexual abuse.

We were talking about this a little bit in terms of media, but it's broader than media. I think it's how you see in certain societies where there's even a shift in terminology; in the language that's

used. For example, in the UK, there was a major shift in language, in the terminology that's used, [and it's] has had a big impact.

When the media uses more positive [terminology] there is a big shift in how survivors are viewed. So [reframing] a 'victim' to a 'survivor' and moving away from framing survivors as promiscuous, even using words like young prostitutes who are asking for it or consenting to sexual activity and entrapping innocent men. What we saw in the UK was a shift in language over time where survivors weren't as negatively portrayed, and they were actually seen as people who were deserving of support and [as being involved in situations] where there was a clear power hierarchy and where a crime occurred. This shift happens in the media in terms of language that's used to describe even what's occurring. So, that's an important thing that needs to happen in a society in order to change a lot of these societal stigmas.

Even when we think about terminology, there's a lot of muddying of the water, whether it's child sexual violence, child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation, and what's part of what. The reality is it muddies what the nature of the problem is and what we're all collectively describing. So, I think that's part of the issue. If some advocates feel like what they're working on is sexual exploitation and others call it child sexual abuse, there's not a collective hand in working together towards advancing the issue.

Rollo Romig: What are some of the ways that you think are effective in getting governments to actually tune into this and devote attention and resources?

Yusra Shawar: I think it's the personal connection oftentimes. We saw this in the UK where survivors and their families would actually go and visit politicians, and that would make a big impact. Those kinds of personal connections are really important. It's understanding who your audience is: a ministry of health is very different from a ministry of finance. The framing for a ministry of finance is more about what's the return on investment, what does this have an effect on jobs and societal productivity versus with a ministry of health it's about looking at population outcomes. But even there, you can have more rights-based framings, but the rights-based framings don't fly in a ministry of finance. So I think striking the right balance in terms of framing is also another important element in how to advance the issue.

The reality is each of these actors have their own incentives and value structures that you have to speak to. Oftentimes advocates think that their problem is self-evident, but the reality is there's so many competing self-evident problems. For that reason, curating these framings to people according to their incentive structure is really what is needed.

Rollo Romig: What have you observed in terms of what makes these collaborations between different stakeholders effective and what causes them to sometimes fall apart?

Oftentimes people who care about the same thing don't even understand the nature of the problem in the same way, and that causes coordination and governance challenges in trying to advance their issue. One example I've studied is trying to advance the issue of early childhood development on the global health agenda. But the reality is people within this community actually don't even agree on who the early child is. There's some who say it starts at conception, others say it starts at birth, and on the other end, others say the early child starts at preschool age, while others say it advances up until eight years old. So that is just one small example of how not agreeing can cause a lot of coordination issues.

Then, within early childhood development, people come from very different sectors—you have health, education, nutrition, child protection, and social welfare sectors all involved. On a national level, each of these have their own ministries, their own budgets, so trying to come together to coordinate and work towards advancing early childhood development outcomes is very difficult. So understanding the nature of the problem in the same way [is important] and working across these different governance structures is often very difficult. Those are examples of coordination [challenges].

Rollo Romig: What do you think would make a really big difference in stopping childhood sexual abuse in the next few years?

Yusra Shawar: A big one is [addressing] the cultural norms and stigmas around this issue. Societal awareness—how they see victims and perpetrators and how they address the situation—is probably one of the biggest ones in my mind. Without that, it's very difficult for the interventions to work or for the laws to make sense. There has to be a societal mind shift about this issue. Nobody really feels like it's an issue that could affect them too, and so it's always a surprise. And then when it does affect them, it brings a lot of shame or it brings a lot of stigma so they don't want to share. It's a hard [conversation] to have in public discourse.

But I have hope in terms of what I'm seeing through the studies that I'm doing. There is progress that has been made, whether it be in Bolivia bringing it up on the global level in the international court [or] in Germany where they're institutionalizing all these different mechanisms like a commission that is dedicated to child sexual abuse and a national Survivors Council that's dedicated to this issue. We see more movements around survivors' agency and their centrality in this, [which] is a huge plus in their increasing voice.

There are a lot more challenges— like with the online space—but there's more and more countries working together and some really good things happening that give me hope.

Rollo Romig: Thank you for talking with me today.

Rollo Romig: (he/him) is a freelance journalist who writes most often for The New York Times and The New Yorker. He is the author of the book I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India. He teaches writing at The New School in New York City. He was born and raised in Detroit.

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