



“Best practices are to center survivors”: Mona Sinha of Equality Now on the importance of acting as strategic convener to support the voices and work of local organizations.

Alec Saelens

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Alec Saelens: Could you please introduce yourself and describe the problem that you're addressing with your organization?

Mona Sinha: I am Mona Sinha, I'm the Global Executive Director of Equality Now. Equality Now works to prevent violence and discrimination against women and girls. Child sexual abuse is a piece of what we do. We focus more broadly on women and girls, and we focus on sexual exploitation, as in trafficking, and also in sexual exploitation online, so there are two issue areas that we are trying to solve.

We work with partners on the ground, through coalitions, and we also work, in some cases, with governments and individual adolescent girls to bring violations that lead to sexual exploitation to justice. We do that in a number of ways. We do a lot of research around it, and make sure that it's top of mind for large agencies, such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, etc., around the globe.

We also conduct strategic litigation in certain cases that are high impact but also high resources and quite difficult for the people concerned. Most of our strategic litigation is around adolescent girls, so that's probably a closer fit to the work. Our intended audience is definitely

civil servants, organizations that act in the same space, governments, and the women and girls who are most impacted on the ground.

Alec Saelens: What makes your approach distinct from that of other organizations that work in the space? Where did you take inspiration from?

Mona Sinha: Our approach is rooted in the law. We believe that the law is foundational, because if you don't have the law, there is nothing you can fall back on to make sure that your rights are protected. But even as we choose to transform the law, or right-size injustice, there is also a huge part of our work that focuses on implementation of the law, so requiring that when some laws may exist, but may not be well-implemented. We want to find solutions together, centering the voices of survivors, to ensure that the laws are appropriate and applied to their lived experience. We work in lived and legal equality, because you can't have one without the other.

Our inspiration draws from the fact that we are very intentional about systems change. The people who suffer these harms are not always in a position to fix them because of systemic discrimination. The legal systems are the most fundamental of the systems that drive a multi-sectoral approach in fixing this, whether it be through policy change or through interventions that hold back women and girls from the very get-go.

I think of it as a combination of an upstream and downstream solution. Downstream, where harm has already happened, we can intervene with litigation and other means to correct and redress the issues. Of course, prevention is more important in some senses, and we do that with laws and with research, and with amplifying the situation through our coalition partners, and communicating that widely, so there is a widespread ignition of action on the ground.

Alec Saelens: Can you give me some examples of those downstream and upstream solutions?

Mona Sinha: Let's look at sexual exploitation in the digital space, because that is a space that is growing rapidly and doesn't have too many guardrails around it. It's also a multi-sectoral issue, because we obviously have tech companies involved, we have governments involved, we have individuals involved, and people like us who want to make change. We have partnered with women in AI [artificial intelligence] to form a coalition called Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRi), and we have put together a framework around governance, around violence in the digital space.

We launched it at the UN Commission on the Status of Women last year in March 2023, and that helped frame the work of the Secretary General and the Global Digital Compact, which is happening in September. That's important because once the standard has been presented to all the UN-affiliated countries who sign on and they agree to these standards, that's when they can be held accountable for delivering on them.

That's the upstream piece of it. We want to make sure the issue gets attention, the issue is defined within a feminist and a human rights space, which it had not been before, and make

sure that countries recognize and fully understand the importance of tackling these issues. On a downstream issue, in the digital space, it's still quite nascent. We are working with a number of partners to figure out the next big step, because the UK is the only country that has a law around online safety. Other countries are still figuring it out.

Is there the ability to do some strategic litigation? Perhaps. We are always looking to see what is in the space, but we have very strict guardrails and criteria for doing that kind of work. For example, we just did a sex trafficking case in Malawi where we had proposed that the government had failed a young child who had been involved. It had been put on the shelf for a while, came back on, and the government agreed that there was harm done. I can't go into all the details of the case, but basically, the government agreed to do a settlement. As part of the settlement, we also required that they would consider changing the law.

That's what I mean by downstream, because we had to have an adolescent go through the harm, plus the brutality of reliving it in court, and all of the time that it took to get to justice. We're finally at the other side of it, but still negotiating the closure of it.

Alec Saelens: You talked about making this issue get more attention, particularly through feminist and human rights spaces. Can you explain that evolution over time and where we sit now. What has been your role in helping to shift that focus in those spaces?

Mona Sinha: I'll give you an example from another area. A few decades ago, female genital mutilation was regarded as a cultural norm, and it was not on a global agenda as a human rights abuse. When Equality Now started doing all of the research and publishing all of the research, we redefined this issue as a human rights issue, not a cultural norm. It started to get a lot of traction, and it was placed on the UN's registry for human rights abuse. That has changed the entire conversation about female genital mutilation around the world. Today, it's no longer just regarded as a cultural norm, but there have been serious steps taken to change laws across the world to ban it. That's how we put that issue on the agenda.

Similarly, digital violence is something that everyone is recognizing more and more, especially with the widespread use of artificial intelligence, and the prevalence of things like deep fakes. We have been publishing a lot of research showing the impact of these things and how they're spread. We have discovered that just taking sites down, for example, is not a solution, because they could be put up in a nanosecond by tweaking some kind of code. There has to be more than that. The most effective approach is to hold these big organizations accountable. You can't hold a country accountable until they understand the issue, agree to sign something to say that they will work very hard to prevent it, and then develop some kind of model law that helps protect women and girls online.

Alec Saelens: Could you describe something that you tried, that you thought might help to move the field forward, but was something that didn't work? What did you learn from it?

Mona Sinha: Well, the biggest obstacle is the openness of countries to sign declarations, or sign protocols. We have the Committee to End Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and most countries in the world have signed it. Interestingly, the United States has not, so it's hard to hold them accountable for having equal laws and equal rights for women, which is the importance of having this committee.

The first point is to ensure that countries understand the importance of signing these conventions or treaties or global digital compacts in this case. The second point is to make sure in the local arena, once these have been signed and countries are committed to the actions thereof, that they follow through. There also needs to be enough movement within the justice system to ensure that these laws are upheld.

Of course, there is always pushback on some of these things, where there are members of communities that don't want this practice to be banned, or don't want this practice to be changed. There are constant threats from those voices getting louder or coalescing in a way that could harm or prevent the work that we're trying to do. That's pretty much what we face.

Since this work is done by civil service organizations, there's a huge lack of funding. Overall, globally, less than 2% of funding goes to women and girls' issues. That is a type of hidden violence in some sense, because it's not a wound or something that you see, but it is very damaging. Violence against women robs them of their agency, of their ability to participate in the economy in any meaningful fashion. It pulls their contribution out from the country's GDP, if that's how you want to measure it. Additionally, there are also the concomitant mental health issues and all of the stresses and terrible consequences of violence. You don't always face all of them, but pulled together, it can be quite daunting.

Alec Saelens: Could you talk about the Malawi case as an example of how a country got on board and started implementing new practices to deal with sexual violence issues?

Mona Sinha: In a research project that we did, we learned that one in every five women and girls is at risk of sexual violence and abuse, and 42% of girls experience physical violence before their 18th birthday. The prevalence of violence is very high, and one form of it is trafficking for sexual exploitation. Approximately 30% of these young people are aged between 14 and 18 years. Despite Malawi having fairly robust legal frameworks which offer protection to women and girls, they enacted a Trafficking in Persons Act in 2015 to provide for the prevention and elimination of trafficking, including sexual exploitation. The act says specifically that it provides 14 or 15 years of imprisonment for offenses, and 21 years of imprisonment when it involves a child. There's also a Child Care Protection and Justice Act, which was formulated in 2010, and this was in response to domesticating the UN Convention of the rights of the child.

Their acceptance of the UN convention on the rights of the child now reaches down into the country level, and this prohibits child trafficking, including commercial sexual exploitation. We filed a case before the African Committee on Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, otherwise called ACERWC, seeking to hold Malawi accountable for the failure to protect a young

child called Maggie. It's the case of a young woman who was deceived and trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation. She was then subjected to a myriad of violations, including local, regional, international human rights standards. But it's not Maggie alone, because Maggie is emblematic of a wider issue within Malawi's response to sex trafficking, because it's a source, a destination, and a transit country of human trafficking. They're trafficked from Malawi to the broader South Africa region, parts of Europe and the Middle East.

Malawi is also a destination for sex trafficking from other African countries, such as Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia. Sexually exploited girls and women have to also work at bars or rest houses, where they are coerced to have sex with customers, and they are also trafficked by truck drivers along major truck routes, who promise them various things.

This is an age-old pattern that we see everywhere. It's not a life of employment or a life of marriage, but it's a life of sexual abuse and exploitation. This always results in high profits for perpetrators, and comes at a relatively low risk of prosecution. That is why we engage in this activity, to make sure that the rights of the women and girls are front and center. What we do in the litigation is make sure we have all the facts, ensure that the women and girls we are working with are safeguarded and protected and have resources so they're able to function while it's happening. We also make sure that they understand the long arc of justice, because it does take time.

That's exactly what we did in the Malawi case. We did the research; we made sure that Maggie and her family were safe. The case was put on hold for a few years because the government didn't deem that it was representative, or able to be represented. More recently, they came back and said, "Yes, you can file it." Once we got to that point, it moved pretty quickly because we had all of the information that we needed. The government came back, acknowledged that they were culpable, and offered a settlement, which we are still negotiating, or it may have been negotiated. We're making sure it happens. Then there's the request to change the law. That was the broad-strokes approach in this case.

Alec Saelens: Could you drill into a bit more detail into the ways that you keep a person that is bringing a claim in front of the courts, who is representative of the more systemic issue at hand, safe? How do you care for their welfare?

Mona Sinha: We always ask them what is most needed for their safety and their mental health. We connect them to local people who can provide those supports. We offer financial support so that they're able to feel protected. In some cases, they need safeguarding when they show up at court. We take more of a wraparound approach that helps them have the mental and physical safety that they need, and the financial safety that will keep them whole as they go through it, as they're sometimes unable to engage in employment or a means of earning revenue.

Alec Saelens: What is the role of shifting cultural norms? You referred to it as being important, notably when you drew the parallel with female genital mutilation. What strategies or solutions are most effective to bring about shifts like that?

Mona Sinha: Many people are not even aware of what their legal rights are. So, the first thing is awareness and making sure that people are aware that they do have rights, or that their rights aren't protected in the way that they should be. Advocacy, which is the way that you ignite local norm change, is largely done by people on the ground. Centering survivors, their stories and their ability to heal and get justice is our approach to how we do this.

The media is a key partner in this. Certainly with the case in Malawi, the amplification of it in the press to the extent that Maggie would be comfortable with it is important for people to realize that these avenues do exist, and for perpetrators to realize that there are organizations that will take them to justice. The ultimate hope is that the government would do this work in the best way possible. To do that, the people impacted have to feel safe and strong enough to take these cases to the government and seek redress. Any kind of norm change has to be multifaceted, most of all, people have to understand the importance of norm change. They also have to realize the impact that this norm change could have on their communities. The framing of norm change is important, because norms are usually informal and come up in society as a result of various factors that propose a certain way of life.

When you challenge that, that also has to come from the grassroots, and from people who live in those communities. I could come in from somewhere else and say, "You know what? This is not so great," but who am I to challenge that, because I don't live in that community. I don't have to function in that community. The most impactful norm change comes from the people who live within those communities that can demand that they are upheld in the way that's most respectful and safe for women and girls.

Alec Saelens: How do you generate that trust, and how do you build those relationships? Do you have any insights for how to create partnerships and coalitions of stakeholders that operate at different levels, but come together for a common goal, each fulfilling their own role as part of the bigger picture of change?

Mona Sinha: Equality Now has been doing this work for over 30 years, and we are known as an expert in this legal field of social change, advocating for women and girls. And we are also known as a valued strategic convener of different players in the space. We start by building coalitions and identifying people who are in the space. Sometimes we request a call for proposals or applications to join the coalition. Usually, with a smaller group of people or the founding members of a coalition, we will develop a strategy; we will develop a plan on how to expand the mission of the coalition going forward, and so forth.

Then, we will convene people who have an interest in the work and in this space. Sometimes we will act as a secretariat of the coalition, and sometimes we will be just a participant. Sometimes we will initially seed fund the coalition, depending on what it is and what our role is; at other times, we will be a contributing partner. There are many different ways of setting these up. Most importantly, it serves as a mechanism for people to come together, even if they have different

viewpoints, and talk about it, then come to a solution that we can agree upon. That methodology has worked pretty well for us around the world.

Coalitions are always grassroots and on the ground. It's not the UN piece, and it's not international; it's much more national and local.

Alec Saelens: Do you have insights or best practices that others in this space can learn from?

Mona Sinha: Best practices are to center survivors, to listen first to what the issues are and what the nuances of the issues are, make sure the focus is on justice and making sure that the harms don't recur. Then building trust, which is showing up and doing things the right way. If you don't have trust, the whole thing falls apart. The key components are authenticity, commitment, and radically listening.

Certainly, when you take something to court, which is what we do, it's having the expertise to execute against that plan. You have to have excellence in execution, make sure that you have all the research done, have done your homework, know what the plan is and how to move forward. Stay dogged about it, too, because it's hard.

In terms of convening, it would be helpful to come together and agree on a path forward and agree on priorities. That's what we do in the beginning of our coalitions, bring our minds together. Again, center survivors, listen, and map out a strategy going forward, and then make sure that it's held by people at the ground level, and provide whatever support is necessary.

Alec Saelens: In the next five years, what would have the most significant impact in the fields moving forward?

Mona Sinha: Having strong laws is critical. Making sure the laws are written in a way that centers survivor voices is also critical. Making sure those laws are implemented, perpetrators are brought to justice, and women and girls whose lives have been turned upside down have a new chance at reliving them.

Alec Saelens: Thank you so much for your time, Mona.

Alec Saelens is a former journalist who supports SJN and its partners track solutions journalism's impact on society and the industry. In his former role, he researched and consulted on the connection between solutions journalism and revenue. He is co-founder of The Bristol Cable, the UK's pioneering local media cooperative. Before SJN, he was a researcher and coach for the Membership Puzzle Project and an analyst for NewsGuard.

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