



## Interview with Yasmin Vafa (Rights4Girls)

Lissa Harris

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**Lissa Harris: Could you please start by introducing yourself and your project a little bit?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** I'm Yasmin Vafa. I'm the co-founder and executive director of Rights4Girls. We are a national human rights organization based in Washington, D.C., and we work to address gender-based violence against young women and girls in the United States. Our work is focused on changing the narrative and policies that allow girls to be criminalized when they experience gender-based violence, and we promote approaches that offer girls safety, healing, and justice. Our work focuses on federal and state policy and advocacy, research, training and technical assistance, and coalition building.

**Lissa Harris: Who is the typical beneficiary of what you do and how do they benefit from your work?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** Mostly young women and girls and gender expansive youth, particularly youth and other children across the country, as well as those who serve them. Youth who come in contact with systems such as the child welfare system, the youth and adult legal systems, as well as marginalized youth. Youth who are marginalized by race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status. Basically children who are facing various forms of adversity, disability status. For us, it's really important to highlight the fact that a lot of these youth, and particularly girls who are our focus, experience gender-based violence at disproportionate rates. But what really sets them apart is that not only are they not recognized as victims of crime, but they're too often punished for those experiences of violence and funneled through what we call the abuse to prison pipeline. So for us, it's really important to not only draw attention and to name this injustice, but to promote policies that really dismantle this pipeline.

Through legislation, through working with judges, in the delinquency setting, in the family court, and dependency setting and tribal courts to make sure that they're equipped with the tools to be able to identify these youth when they come into their courtrooms, and to improve their responses, to really be able to offer these youth services.



And to also train various stakeholders, such as systems professionals, child welfare administrators, social workers, youth justice professionals, probation officers, not just court professionals, but those who work with these young people across various systems, and of course, legislators and others who are key decision makers. And then making sure that the public understands these issues.

**Narrative change is a really important part of our work.** We have a campaign that we have operated since 2015 called There's no Such Thing as a Child Prostitute, what we call the No Such Thing campaign, that has worked to not only change our language, but to change our laws. We've actually inspired the Associated Press to change its style book to discourage the use of language like child prostitute or variations of that term. **What we found is the way in which journalists, the media and ultimately the public talk about these issues and talk about these children impacts the way they're actually treated in society and by these systems. Even how the public perceives these issues really impacts this population.** It's a multifaceted approach, but the ultimate goal is to impact how these kids are treated in society and among these systems that they come into contact with on a daily basis.

**Lissa Harris: How do you find and engage with youth that stand in need of your services and your aid?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** We partner with a lot of youth serving organizations. We partner with different service providers who serve, for example, trafficked and exploited youth in different communities, and adult survivors who have already completed their journey of healing and who now engage in advocacy themselves. **All of our work is guided by the work and advocacy of survivors themselves. It's really important that all of that work is grounded in the voices and experiences of survivors themselves and young people, it informs much of our work. All of the remaining gaps and challenges that exist, it's really guided by what young people are telling us they need, as well as what survivors are telling us they need.**

That's a critical aspect of the work, and we rely on our partners on the ground and those frontline service providers to inform us of what they're seeing and what those young people themselves say they need.

**Lissa Harris: What makes your approach distinctive? What sets you apart from other organizations and makes you different in this space?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** I think what makes our work really unique is that we sit at the intersection of multiple different systems and issues. We're not strictly an anti-trafficking organization or a youth



justice organization, or a racial justice organization or an anti-violence organization. The nature of our work is that we sit at the intersection of all of these different spaces and issues, which makes our work really holistic and intersectional.

By nature of sitting at the intersection of all of these different spaces, we are able to issue spot multiple different gaps and perceive different challenges and nuances to these various different complexities that I think exist in the policy space, particularly at the federal level where big conversations are being had about things like gender-based violence or criminal justice reform that often don't contemplate the complexities and nuances of the lives of, for example, marginalized girls, that they're often invisible in conversations around criminal justice reform or racial justice or gender-based violence.

For us, by nature of being at the table in so many of these different spaces and being a part of so many of these different coalitions and movements, we are able to not just highlight where a lens is missing and where they're not able to maybe see certain perspectives or certain voices aren't at the table. We're able to make connections amongst different groups and different organizations, and maybe people that maybe wouldn't otherwise have met.

That's a big part of our work that I'm really proud of, the ability to make connections amongst organizations and groups that maybe would not otherwise have been able to meet and connect, but whose work I think really compliments each other and makes for a more rich social justice space.

**Lissa Harris: Would it be fair to say that if you were just in the broader policy space or if you were just focused on frontline direct service work, that there's issues that you wouldn't necessarily see? That having a foot in all these different worlds lets you see farther down into the future?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** Oh, 100%, absolutely. I think especially doing services on issues related to gender-based violence, it becomes very difficult. When you're serving survivors and you're working with victims, it can be very difficult to focus on policy or to see past the immediate needs of the population that you're serving. It becomes very difficult to focus on or even pay attention to some of those external factors at play. Even in the policy space, not paying attention to what's going on in some other areas can make it very difficult to do your work in a way that I think is thoughtful and complimentary of the broader space. It's important to be conscious of what's happening in other spaces, and how our work can be more holistic and complementary in terms of the broader social justice movement.



We're always able to say, well, this is really important, but have you paid attention to the potential unintended consequences of this policy for this population? Or, this is really interesting, this piggybacks on some legislation that this other organization or this other coalition has been pushing. I think this could be mutually beneficial. We could bring them together and both push for this.

To give you an example, the anti-trafficking movement and the criminal and youth justice movement, separately they exist in silos as a lot of these groups typically do, but there were some legislation recently that we've been pushing where there are cases of these young girls who have been put in these horrific situations where they have been forced to basically protect themselves against their adult exploiters. Young girls like Santoya Brown, Crystal Kaiser, and most recently Piper Lewis, have killed their adult exploiters and have been sometimes tried and sentenced as adults, often to lengthy prison sentences, sometimes charged with murder and could spend their life behind bars.

There was legislation we were looking at that would allow judges to take a trauma-informed approach and to divert from mandatory minimum sentencing in these cases. To look at a child's childhood history and depart. It was an opportunity for us to bring those two communities together and say, here's an opportunity to actually work together and promote legislation with these two communities that never work together and really don't know each other. It was a real positive collaboration, and one that I think allowed this legislation to be supported and have much more bipartisan support in the federal space, which is always rare. That's just one example of how we're able to transcend silos, because I think that's one of the problems. The reality is in the social justice space, we all benefit when a lot of these groups can come together and work together. But unfortunately, the nature of the work is that we often get tunnel vision and we stay in our respective areas. When there are opportunities to be more collaborative and work together, it really is much more enriching.

**Lissa Harris: Do you think that there are insights or teachable lessons that can be taken from your work and that others could use either in this field or maybe in different spaces entirely?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** I think our approach of trying to build meaningful, genuine relationships with partners across multiple issues and systems that touch on the lives of the population that we seek to uplift and represent has been very valuable for us, not just in terms of enriching our work and our understanding of the population that we seek to represent and defend, which is marginalized young women and girls. It has served the population that we seek to represent much better, because it has allowed our advocacy to be much more thoughtful, much more nuanced, and allowed us to weigh in across multiple different issues.



Over the years, just using the federal level as an example, we've been able to advance bipartisan legislation that has improved the child welfare response. When it comes to young women and girls who've been abused or exploited in the child welfare system, it's improved the child welfare response to young women and girls. We've been able to make sure that the youth justice system is screening youth who come in contact with the system for sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, divert those children into services.

We know that girls who come into that system are overwhelmingly survivors of sexual abuse, and many of them have been trafficked. Making sure they're counting pregnant and parenting girls, ending the shackling of pregnant girls, taking a gender responsive approach to juvenile justice reform, that's something that we were able to achieve.

And taking a racial justice lens when it comes to the issue of sex trafficking, which is something that has not really been done in that field - they really lack that lens. We're really proud of that, being able to take all of those really important lenses and bring it to our work has not only made the work much more thoughtful and richer, but has improved our advocacy. I think it's a great model and one that I would hope that others would look at and think to emulate aspects of it.

**Lissa Harris: How do you measure your success and what do you use for evidence that you're making progress?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** It depends. For different aspects of our work we measure it differently. In terms of legislative advocacy, we look to see the laws that we have actually passed, we look to see the impact. Over the last several years we've passed a number of different pieces of legislation, both at the federal and state level. To give examples of the impact that that has had, to use the child welfare legislation as an example. Prior to that legislation, children who went missing from the foster care system, to use the words of the survivor who testified for that legislation, she said "There are no amber alerts for us when we go missing from care. No one looks for us."

Prior to that legislation, there were about a few thousand children who were reported missing from care. After we wrote and passed that legislation, the reports went up to about 13,000. After that and currently, there are about 25,000 kids who are now reported missing from care. That's a tangible difference. Those kids are now on the radar and people are actively looking for them. Federal law enforcement and state law enforcement are actually looking for those children, identifying them, and screening them and getting them the services that they need. Other tangible things that we've been able to do is legislate the ability to recover missing children. There's at



least 3000 missing children who've been recovered as a result of legislation that we've developed and passed.

We've been able to triple authorization levels for federal funding for victim services and double the amount of human trafficking funding. In terms of tangible victim services, that's also a way that we measure success. In terms of our training and technical assistance, we actually do a formal evaluation.

We do that after every training, and then we receive the evaluations and see how effective those have been. To date we've trained more than 750 judges nationwide on how to identify children in their courtrooms and how to promote alternatives to detention. So not criminalizing these children who are identified as trafficked, and making sure that they're actually afforded the services that they need to heal. So those are some of the ways that we measure success.

**Lissa Harris: Sometimes in trying to solve really tough problems, you can learn as much from things that didn't work as things that did. Are there challenges that you faced in the past or that you're currently facing that you haven't been able to really overcome or solve?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** These issues are really tough. I think sometimes there's just the general reluctance to deal with just these difficult subjects. I will say that one of the challenges, particularly with respect to the sex trafficking aspect of our work, has been, especially in the aftermath of the QAnon situation, it's really impacted our work negatively. I will say it has almost led to a backlash. We are operating with a knowledge deficit now, we're basically having to educate people about the realities and inform them about what sex trafficking really looks like, that it's not like some of these hysterical myths and tropes that were sometimes fed in the medial think that whole QAnon debacle really damaged the reality of what we're seeing. You don't need to hyperbolize what child sex trafficking and sex trafficking look like. It's already a huge problem in every community, unfortunately.

Who it's impacting is oftentimes disproportionately young women and girls of color, LGBTQ and gender expansive youth of color. [QAnon] has been a challenge that's almost made people think it was either made up or it's this crazy thing and the liberal cabal. Those are some of the challenges that we have right now, correcting the misinformation on both sides that people either dismiss as exaggerated or they have been fed misinformation about what it actually looks like.

**Lissa Harris: Do you find that makes it harder for your work to gain credibility with people? Are they seeing you as something that people are being hysterical about so I don't need to pay too**



**much attention to it? Or is it more that just some people are just laser focused on the wrong problem and false narratives?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** It can be both. It just means we have to start with so much more of a 101 education. The groundwork that we have to lay before we can even talk about the issue becomes much more. There's so much more work to do to even get to a ground level understanding of what sex trafficking is, what it looks like, who's impacted by it, what are the dynamics, who are the players, what even causes it. This is before we can even get to a conversation about how to address it, so it's made that aspect of the work more difficult.

**Lissa Harris: Can you talk about how you are working to advance systems level change in the field and how you're trying to bring about change in a macro way?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** A lot of the research we have done over the years has been based on talking to service providers, talking to systems professionals, and most especially talking to young women and girls and survivors who've experienced the system - particularly the youth legal system and the adult legal system over the years. What we have come to find, and we included this information in our first report at the Abuse to Prison Pipeline, the Girls Story, which we published in 2015 with our partners at the Georgetown Law Center and the MIS Foundation, was that an overwhelming percentage of girls behind bars had reported past histories of sexual and physical abuse. What we found was that when we looked at those high rates of trauma together with the most common offenses for those girls, it was very clear that they were actually being punished and criminalized because of the abuse.

The most common offenses for those girls were things like running away from home, truancy and skipping school, and prostitution offenses, even though they were too young to be consenting to sex and even though the law said they should be considered victims of human trafficking. We wanted to see if this was a one-off in a couple of jurisdictions or was this a pattern. Unfortunately we realized it was a pattern. For us it became very important to educate about this issue and to reform the system. Given these high rates, it was 73% in some parts, in California it was upwards of 80%, South Carolina, same thing, we felt it was really important to decriminalize for acts of violence and to decarcerate, and to really promote justice reform that was gender responsive, racially just, and that understood the impacts of gender-based violence.

That was really lacking. There was no narrative about what justice reform looked like for girls of color and particularly survivors of violence. That really became our focus, and that's what we've been focused on to reform the system. Particularly when it comes to girls, advocate that they don't belong in the system at all.



What justice reform looks like for girls is not being involved in the system, not being criminalized whatsoever, and they are much better served in the community, in community-based programs, in treatment. Many of these behaviors that they're actually being criminalized for, like running away from home, should really be begging the question, what are they running from? Rather than just criminalizing that behavior, often they're running away to escape abuse. It's important for us to realize that those are behaviors that are highly correlated with trauma, and so it's important to serve those children rather than punish those children.

We've done a lot of advocacy around that. We continue to do a lot of advocacy around that, and we are about to release our update to the Abuse to Prison Pipeline report, basically saying that in all of these years, post COVID, post the BLM movement, post the Me Too movement, this is still happening. We highlight three of the most urgent pathways that still exist, and we highlight some of the progress that's been made. There's more work to do and we continue to highlight where we think the movement and the field needs to move to continue to make more change, especially on behalf of this population.

What we do know is that this becomes generational. When these girls are incarcerated and not provided the services that they need to heal, they are then released. Without those services, it fuels a system of re-victimization and then adult incarceration. All of the adult data reifies what we already know, when you look at the adult women population, same thing, very high rates of abuse and in the adult incarcerated population. So it just makes sense to serve these girls instead of incarcerating them.

**Lissa Harris: It sounds like you work with a lot of partners, and this is a space where there's a lot of emotion, there's a lot of different approaches. There's a lot of organizations with different goals, whether that's victim advocacy, survivor advocacy, or a focus on youth that need services right now or advocates for sex workers or advocates for marginalized communities. Do you have situations that you've encountered where partners that you're working with are at odds? How do you work with that?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** Inevitably that happens, especially with certain issues or hot button issues. But I think the most important thing, especially when we're talking about girls and young people and survivors of violence, is focusing on the areas of alignment and focusing on services and being able to get young people the services and support that they need.

I think when it comes to these issues in particular it hasn't been too contentious, because I think most of the groups working on these issues agree that it's very important to promote policies and





approaches that would support the defense and release of these young girls who are being either accused or charged with any type of offense that's related to their abuse and exploitation. Those who have been sentenced, convicted, and incarcerated, policies that would allow them to be able to reduce their sentences and be released.

Luckily there hasn't been too much in-fighting or controversy among the organizations, but there have been challenges amongst legislators and governors and state governments. I think when it comes to that aspect, it hasn't been too controversial. Being able to build support and mobilize advocacy at the state level to be able to advance some of the legislation is really what we're hoping for. To be able to highlight some promising state approaches like affirmative defense laws or legislation like Sarah's Law, or some of the domestic violence survivors justice legislation to be able to retroactively allow re-sentencing. Revisiting some of those convictions to provide a trauma-informed lens. Those are the types of things that we're hoping to promote with this new report that would really ideally inspire some of these advocates who are doing this great work at the state level already.

**Lissa Harris: What do you think is most needed from other actors or partners to advance the systems level change that you're seeking?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** There's some great work that's already happening, they just need support. For us, we're trying to highlight this issue and build more attention and support for this effort, for this cause for these girls. There's been a lot of momentum around how young people are treated in the legal system.

We've had some great momentum in the last couple of years at the Supreme Court level. That's likely to change with the current makeup of the Supreme Court, but we are seeing some advancement at the state level. Just this weekend, Illinois banned juvenile life without parole, so now more than half the states across the country have banned juvenile life without parole. But we're still seeing the ability to charge a lot of these young girls who are essentially engaging in self-defense against adult exploiters, either their sex buyers or their sex traffickers in many of these instances with pretty serious sentences. In Crystal Kaiser's case, it's intentional homicide which carries life in prison. Piper Lewis was also a murder charge. There's a young woman in Texas, Zefiniah Trevino, it's a capital murder charge in Texas. So there's a number of these cases across the country. We're trying to help create something to bolster their advocacy and help provide some examples for the advocates in these states to be able to find some inspiration, maybe introduce some legislation, connect with others in states that have already done this work. And to be able to highlight some of the progress that's already happened, but maybe promote where some of the gaps are that remain.



**Lissa Harris: How do you see your work evolving over the next five years?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** One of the things that we hope is to not really be around anymore. We really hope that these issues don't remain as pervasive as they are. It was devastating to see the new CDC data this week on the staggering rates of sexual violence for teen girls, that they're the highest in the decade and the impact that it's having on teen girls. It's very disheartening to still be getting data like that. The goal is to not have to be around and not have to be dealing with these issues and getting to a point where gender-based violence is not a reality for girls and women. Unfortunately, that's not where we are today. To the extent that these issues keep happening, we'll continue to move on, and keep advocating and educating and doing the work of trying to build support for the work that has to happen. But the ultimate goal is to prevent this violence from happening in the first place, to continue to educate around the harms, and to build as much support as we can to mobilize to ultimately end this violence from happening in the first place.

**Lissa Harris: Is there anything that we didn't cover that you thought was important to add or to talk about?**

**Yasmin Vafa:** I really just want to highlight the report and that, unfortunately after all this time, it's still happening. Girls and young women still don't get as much attention. I know they're a smaller share of the legal system population, but the things that they're experiencing are particularly egregious. One of the concerns that we do have is over the last 10 years or so, there has been a lot of great work on the part of advocates to build a lot of bipartisan support for criminal justice reform and sentencing reform at the federal level. Unfortunately some of that seems to be changing. There was some really great legislation that had been introduced and even some of it had been worked into some trafficking legislation, and at the last minute it was cut out. It's concerning to see folks on the right shifting gears a little bit and turning away from that after there had been so many years and so much effort put into making this a bipartisan issue.

Especially when it comes to survivors, and the legislation I'm referring to is Sarah's Law and the Unfair Sentencing of Youth Act. That language was put into the Trafficking Victims Protection Act on the Senate side this year that was introduced by Senators Cornyn and Klobuchar. Unfortunately, a couple of Republican senators insisted that the language come out at the last minute. I'm hoping that that is not indicative of where we're headed, because I think a lot of this legislation is very common sense, and especially when it comes to child sex crime victims who are charged with harming their abusers.



I think everyone can agree that judges should have the discretion to be able to look at sentencing guidelines and use their discretion, and to be able to consider the child's trauma history in these circumstances. Oftentimes, these child defendants are barred from being able to present evidence of the relationship between them and that individual during trial, and the jury never even gets to hear about the fact that they experienced abuse at the hands of that individual. It was very disappointing to see that, and I'm hoping that doesn't continue.

That's another reason with this report, *Criminalized Survivors: Today's Abuse to Prison Pipeline for Girls*, we're hoping that reading the background of so many of these young girls and humanizing what the abuse to prison pipeline really looks like for so many of these young women, understanding that it's disproportionately girls and young women of color, and something has to be done about it. That's the ultimate hope. We're coauthoring [the report] with the Georgetown Law Center on poverty, but it's the Gender Justice Initiative.

*Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter and science writer (MIT '08) based in the Catskills of upstate New York. She currently writes about climate, energy, and environment issues from a local perspective for the Albany Times Union, her own Substack newsletter, and various other digital and print publications.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*