



Conversation with Donna Norton

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Donna, can you introduce yourself?

Donna Norton: I'm Donna Norton, executive vice president of MomsRising, and I am a founding member of MomsRising.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about your origin story? How would you describe MomsRising to someone who's new to the work?

Donna Norton: My founding story is that I shouldn't actually be here. My mother was born in a part of China where it was the tradition to kill the third girl because girls were seen as an economic liability to families. But my grandmother was a midwife, and she argued against that practice and argued that my mother should be saved. My mother went on to be the first one in her family to immigrate to the US, when they had been refugees in the late '40s, and she then brought the rest of my entire family over.

Little did my grandmother know that my mother would end up being the person that helped the entire family and that she would have me, her granddaughter, who helped start one of the largest organizations protecting the rights of women and families in the US. The origin story is that every person's actions have a big impact, that every story has a big impact. It's the founding principle of MomsRising.

Ashley Hopkinson: What about the approach of MomsRising is distinctive or sets the organization apart from other organizations that are doing work with families?

Donna Norton: As Audre Lorde said, we don't live single-issue lives. We try to come to our members and moms in the general American public in a way that relates to what's happening in their lives at any given time.

We don't just focus on one aspect. There are some organizations and some funders that want you to work on just one issue. They'll say, "We just want you to organize around childcare." People may care about childcare, but they also care about how are they going to put food on their tables or what's going to happen when they have their next baby and they have no paid family and medical leave, because the US is one of the few countries in the world that has no guaranteed paid family leave, and a quarter of American mothers go back to work within two weeks of giving birth. One of the most common times for a woman in the US to enter a poverty spell is when she gives birth.

There are so many issues, and we try to activate people across all the issues that they're working on. I think that makes us stronger, because we're also working in coalition with all these different movements at the same time. We do immigrant rights advocacy because a huge number of mothers in America are immigrants, and we can take the concerns of immigrants and bring that to the healthcare coalitions and make sure that healthcare organizations are serving the needs of immigrants. We can strengthen movements across different issues. I think that is really a strength of our work and what we bring to organizing.

Ashley Hopkinson: How have you found success in collaboration? What have you found has worked with partnerships?

Donna Norton: Over the almost 20 years that I've been doing this work with MomsRising, I've really seen that you don't make wins by yourselves. It takes a lot of different organizations and a lot of different sectors to move anything forward.

I was part of the advocacy around the Affordable Care Act, and that took everyone mobilizing, especially across healthcare, across early learning, business organizations, labor organizations. It was a huge push to get that through, and then to protect it against repeal after the Republicans voted to repeal it 50 times. That is something that everybody had to get behind.

We always try to engage a lot of cross-sector partners on all of our advocacy, because we know we don't do it alone. Foundations might want you to take credit for something, but really, nothing happens by yourself. It's always a mass movement. The more we can work in partnership, the more we can lift up other people, other organizations, and make sure lots of groups are getting credit for things, the more effective we are as movements.

Ashley Hopkinson: When you say engagement with other partners, what does that look like?

Donna Norton: It means being in coalition around planning. For example, the advocacy around Build Back Better—which you might remember was one vote away from getting a national childcare system, getting a national elder and disability care system, getting national paid family medical leave guarantees—was a huge campaign. It was incredibly disappointing that we didn't get that by one vote, and yet it also shows how close we are, that we're almost there. Nothing happens quickly. If you look at when Hillary Clinton first raised the issue of healthcare, it was another 20 years until Obama got it through, so it's not surprising.

We've come a huge way in terms of the care economy issues. I remember walking into the women's engagement department of the Obama administration and saying childcare is a huge issue, and they weren't focused on it as a prime issue for women. Over the last 10, 15 years, I think we've really pressed that issue forward, and now it's clearly within the agenda of both the Democrats and the Republicans. We'll talk about the need for childcare, the need for elder care, the need for paid family medical leave. Polling is sky-high across parties for these issues.

We used to do this bingo card where we would list all our issues and have our members play bingo during the State of the Union. When we first started doing that, we would maybe get one X on the bingo card. Now it's like every single one of our boxes is checked during the State of the Union. Our care agenda of childcare, paid family medical leave, elder care, paid sick days—all the supports that make families and businesses thrive are clearly part of the national agenda.

We're so close, we came one vote away, so we're seeing huge progress on those issues. We have achieved paid family medical leave and paid sick days in dozens of states and municipalities now, so we're definitely making progress. We're at the point where we just need to push it over the edge. I think it's a really exciting time.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is a teachable lesson or insight that you've learned over the years from the organization's approach to wellbeing?

Donna Norton: One of the ways we've kept people engaged is that we focus on local, state, and federal, because people need to win. They need to keep feeling like they're winning, that their voices matter, so [you need to] figure out strategically where you can win and bring people along with you. There's a lot of lamenting about all the problems in the world, but if people don't feel like their voices are making change, they're going to check out.

The other thing that we've focused on is that moms are very influential. They're also super busy. Most moms are working during the day, then they're taking care of kids at night. They might have more than one job, and so you really have to figure out how to organize in a way that works for people's lives and whatever level of capacity they have.

We have what we call a welcoming rainbow of action. If you're able to actually go to an in-person event, that's awesome. We try to make things fun for kids. We just did a bootcamp in DC a couple weeks ago where we brought in moms from all over the country and we had activities for the kids. We made it family-friendly. We had a session of Zumba dancing, so it's fun and joyful.

People are longing for connection, so you create a way for people to connect on the ground that makes it easy to have their children there.

We always encourage people to bring kids to meet with their representatives, and the representatives love that. It's very unusual. It makes a big point, so it's super important to make sure advocacy is welcoming for children and moms where they are and then also having ways for people that can't meet in person to take action, whether that's signing on to a petition or sharing a story or writing a letter to the editor—having lots of options for people to engage.

Ashley Hopkinson: Could you share a story of a time when you really got results? What do you think helped elevate it to a win? What do you think made it work?

Donna Norton: There are many recent wins, but the biggest impact that I personally have worked on was the Affordable Care Act, because we were working with mothers who had children who were going to hit lifetime insurance limits. I've followed some of those kids over time and saw how they continued to get care because of the Affordable Care Act, and the peace of mind of knowing they're not going to get kicked off of their insurance because of a pre-existing condition. That has been a huge wellness win, [along] with the expansion of Medicaid and the ability for states to use Medicaid to cover postpartum care for a year. We're at a historic low of people who are not covered by health insurance. Access to healthcare has a huge impact on a family's wellbeing, on psychological wellbeing. Worrying about your child's health and their ability to access healthcare is one of the biggest worries for mothers and families. Those advances that we've been able to make around healthcare, healthcare coverage, healthcare security have had a huge impact on wellbeing.

[It required] a lot of coalition building. There was a lot of story sharing. I think that was one of the first mass [disseminations of] people sharing their personal stories. Before you'd have to get stuff covered by the traditional media to lift up stories, and now we have so many ways of lifting up stories through

social media. We have people videoing their own stories. We can tweet stories directly to members of Congress. We can make our own packages of B-roll and stories and pitch it to local news stations. We can make our own radio ads and send them to radio stations. We can make digital ads of stories and microtarget them. We have so many ways now of educating leaders and the public about what's going on in the real lives of people in this country that we didn't used to have, and I think that's what's really shifted public support for these kinds of issues and policies.

It's really a mobilizing strategy, because if everybody's having the same problem at the same time, it's not an epidemic of personal failures. It's a structural problem that needs a structural solution. Part of our organizing strategy is that if people start sharing their stories, it's like, "Oh my God, I have the same problem. What's the solution?" You can mobilize people in that way. Part of what we're doing is using stories to mobilize people but also shift public perception. Sometimes we're using it to get into traditional media.

We started working on the terrible issues around Black maternal mortality 10 years ago, and it wasn't being talked about at that time. We worked with The Root to lift up some of those stories, and then it started getting picked up by mainstream media, and then we started collecting stories from around the country, but it was not really a known or discussed issue until more recently. It's been that lifting up of stories. We've gotten big investments in maternal health passed. Even during the Trump administration we got something passed on tracking Black maternal health. I think we have really changed a lot of the priorities around investments by lifting up those stories.

Especially now, when people are so skeptical of political advertising, of the media, and even of research, you can't argue when you see someone telling their own story. You can tell that it is real and it's true, and it's something that still can pierce people's biases.

Ashley Hopkinson: How as an organization do you see the work moving toward structural solutions and systems change? How do you see MomsRising in that role?

Donna Norton: We have three levers of change. One is narrative shifting, which we've talked about. The second is legislative and executive advocacy on policies. The third would be voter mobilization.

We cannot get these policies passed until we have the leaders who are prioritizing these policies, so MomsRising does a lot of voter education and voter mobilization. We reached out to 10 million voters in the 2020 election. We think it's important to not just come in right before the elections and say, "You've got to go out to the polls." We're in communities day in, day out, all year round for four years in between the presidential elections, and we're lifting up leaders, we're cultivating people in

communities who can mobilize other people in their communities. We think that voter mobilization is part and parcel with achieving these structural policy changes.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are the challenges around this work? How do you help people within the organization to manage those challenges?

Donna Norton: Part of it is the negativity about politics, the distrust of politics, the feeling that you're not going to make a difference, that your vote isn't going to make a difference, that politicians are corrupt. Some of that is disinformation, some of it is real frustration about what's happening in Congress and in our communities. How do you overcome that?

Part of that is overcoming it with action and hope. We need to activate people in whatever way they want to make a difference. [It could be] in their communities, in their school board discussions about sex education or banning books. Is that where people want to get activated and feel like their voices matter. Or is it around their state-level paid family medical leave policy or expanding Medicaid in their state? Or is it around national policies? Figuring out how to activate them and give them opportunities to activate on different levels, to get people invested in the process, and feel like they have a voice, and feel like they're having an impact, and show people when they're winning.

Then it's the hope [that comes from] showing the good things that are happening in their communities.

There's so much lifting up of the bad things that are happening in communities so, people feel like their community is full of crime and full of bad people. There's a lot of lifting up of that narrative right now, and it's an actual strategy to get people to shift to wanting authoritarianism, wanting a strong leader, feeling like they're insecure. So lifting up the bazillion good things that are happening, the progress that is happening, the great shifts that we have experienced on many of these issues, giving people hope, the great group that's raising money for some cause in your community or who's out there helping, who's doing good things. What is the counternarrative against this feeling that our communities are these dangerous, dark places? All of that's super important for fighting this feeling of fear and of not having any ability to change what's happening in your community.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, what would you like to see prioritized, replicated, scaled? If the people are there and the money is there, what gap would you like to see filled?

Donna Norton: I would love to do more on the ground organizing. We're doing great Zumba parties in Arizona and Nevada right now with our Spanish-speaking communities, lifting up more of those really joyful and fun ways of bringing together moms and communities.

People are so lonely and disconnected right now, and I think that is hugely important. Then I would say more ways of reaching people to engage them. There's a lot of disinformation that's targeting moms right now, with a lot of scary bad messaging about transgender kids that are endangering your children and all this negative messaging, and we need more resources to countermessage that. To break through, you often need money to buy ads to actually reach the people you want to reach, so that's an important piece of the advocacy.

Ashley Hopkinson: What can leaders, decision-makers, and other people do to advance the work in your field?

Donna Norton: It takes a lot of resources to mobilize the entire US, so multi-year funding and funding in scale is important for organizations to really be able to plan and make an impact. Get out the vote efforts need more funding that can be used for both nonpartisan funding and partisan funding when there are certain leaders you know you really need to get elected to pass your policies. There needs to be more funding for organizations to really engage their members to support those specific leaders.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you so much.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*