

Community Leaders in Health Equity (CLHE) Speaker Event Featuring Sonya Shah

Exploring Patriarchy and Sexual Harm: Impact & Accountability

July 19, 2022 | Transcript in English

Event Organized By: Transformative Alliances LLC

Event Funded By: The Colorado Trust

DARA BURWELL (Co-President, Transformative Alliances LLC)

Today in the context of this CLHE speaker event, we are going to take a deeper look at sexism and patriarchy. Fundamentally, sexism is the system of oppression that is designed to dehumanize, devalue, diminish, restrain, commodify, objectify, exploit and confine women and girls.

In practice, it targets women and girls, meaning cisgender and transgender women and girls, and also gender non-conforming people who are perceived as women or girls. There are many aspects of what sexism looks like, and how it expresses.

It saturates every societal system and institution from the inside out. It shapes - at the very base - our conception societally of ideology and how each of us is to function in society. And it also has a particular aspect of it that is especially intimate and particularly interpersonal. From birth to death, we - the folks who are targeted by sexism - have many kinds of deep and close relationships with the very people who oppress us.

The entanglement of sexism with our most fundamental feelings and learning makes it extremely confusing and distorts our understanding of its nature and of its impact. Sexism leaves us with the strong impression of, "This is just the way life is, societally, familiarly, by virtue of nature, and by virtue of God." And it gives us the false impression that the interpersonal is just interpersonal. They are just our individual experiences as opposed to something that is connected to a much larger whole.

Sexual violence and harm against women, girls, and people perceived to be women and girls is a key example of something that appears interpersonal, but that is actually societal.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center tells us that 81% of women in the United States report experiencing sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, including rape, in the course of their lifetime.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that a quarter of girls are sexually abused as children in the United States. And as disturbing as those numbers are - I think that we all know in the context of this room - that those numbers are most probably quite low.

We also know for certain that as sexism intersects with certain other systems of oppression, such as ableism, racism, and cissexism, those numbers absolutely are higher.

As for the health consequences - Oh, importantly, while sexual violence is not exclusively committed by men, it is overwhelmingly committed by them.

All of these factors make clear that sexual violence and harm, committed primarily by men and boys, and very disproportionately against women, girls and people perceived to be women and girls, is a key tool of maintaining and reinforcing sexism and patriarchy. It is an expression of the oppression itself.

Today our speaker Sonya Shah is going to continue this examination. She will guide us through an exploration of sexual harm in specific connection to sexism and patriarchy, some of its ties to health equity, and also consider ways to address and heal this harm through restorative, transformative and healing justice.

So that you will have some additional context about Sonya: She is a social justice educator who is also a professor at the California Institute of Integral

Studies and, in 2016, founded the Ahimsa Collective which works to respond to harm in ways that foster wholeness for everyone.

She is a Buddhist, a first-generation immigrant from northwestern India, and has two children who she adores. She is also a survivor of child sexual abuse, a perspective that is critical to her analysis and approach to this work. Sonya, thank you very much for being here today.

SONYA SHAH (Featured speaker, Ahimsa Collective)

Okay. All right, so, can everybody hear me? Yeah. So I'm going to just talk and tell some stories and share some slides. And, yeah, we'll talk about the fun topic of sexual harm.

I think before starting I just want to say that, like, this whole thing is a trigger warning. Anytime we talk about sexual violence, being a survivor, it's not easy and I think if it comes up for you, it's really important to just notice it and take care of yourself. And if you need to take a deep breath, and you need to walk around, and you need to leave the room - there's no right way to be here. I think it's just such a reality that it's something that sort of is in our lives every day. So...

Well, it's not moving. Now it's moving. There we go. Well, it's not moving. Now it's moving. There we go.

So, just a little context of who I am before getting started. Because in a way, it's like who I am, who am I? And why should you even be here or care? Or trust me to say anything about what we're about to talk about?

And Dara said a little bit...I... I am a survivor of sexual harm. I grew up...my parents immigrated to the US from India when I was very small. And they came from a village like this sort of a village mentality and they came to the tiny village of Manhattan. And, so, in the little village of Manhattan I grew up on, like, the 11th floor of a 20-story building. My parents still have that kind of village mentality, thinking that everybody around you kind of took care of everything, but didn't really know that that's not really the case.

My mother was forced to come to the United States by my father. So, like, right away an extension or sort of an example of patriarchy at its finest, but...he was doing his best. And, you know, I've come to really an understanding that they were all doing their best. But, in that place of being a first generation immigrant, going to a big city, having a mom who was pretty checked out, because she didn't really want to be here....There was the conditions were created for me where there was child sexual abuse in my life by a caretaker, and I didn't know it at all, I had no memory of it, all I knew is that I was, like, terrified of the world, and everybody scared me, and socially anxious. And then I had this feeling that when I got out of my environment, like, something would change.

The one thing that we did have was a lot of educational privilege and a lot of sort of...my parents are middle class, but they really strove for, you know, higher education. So I got out of my, my village, and I went to Providence, Rhode Island, and I went to Brown. And then my fourth day there, I had like this - oh my God – this sort of flash of memories come back.

And for me, that was really the beginning of a light that entered...to feel, I think I felt safe for the first time I felt supported, I felt like I was away and we know that when that happens, that, that's when sort of, we start to remember things. So. And that started my journey into wholeness and into healing and into finding myself and figuring out what it all meant. And, I have to say, you know, I found my light in the darkness, but it's been a 35, 30 year journey and I'm pretty light right now, I feel like a lot of lightness and a lot of healing and that's come from being able to be in it and to go through it and to be with it.

And I think the important thing about sort of sexual harm in the context of child sexual abuse or any context, but mine, is that it wasn't separated out from also being an immigrant, and being South Asian, and being a woman - it was all interconnected and tied. So, I couldn't say, as many of us can't say, like "This is because of racism, and this is because of sexism, and this is because of patriarchy..." I just could say that these things were all connected.

So, a little bit more just about who I am is that in 2016, I started a little community based organization called the Ahimsa Collective. "Ahimsa" is a Sanskrit word that means non-harm, non-injury. In the positive, it translates to compassion and love. And it's really about the ethics of trying to do no harm. And it started as this little small seed and it's grown in a really nice way... So that's kind of a little bit about who I am.

So, before we kind of just launch into maybe more of the intersections of like healing, and accountability, and patriarchy, and how that all works together, I just want to say something about the words that I'm using, because they come from a particular genre of like restorative justice and transformative justice and healing justice... maybe sometimes when we're in our field, we use them in our field, but nobody else uses them, so, we use the term sexual harm just to refer to a spectrum of harms from rape, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, anything that's related to sexual violence.

Obviously, the term survivor is related to someone who's experienced harm... and then oftentimes in our world, we use words like person who did harm and responsible party because there's some thinking out there that if you say, like, "perpetrator, offender, victim" that there's this locking in an identity that you are the act and you for will forever be that, so by saying person who's done harm, responsible party, you're separating out the person from the action and saying, really, calling into question the action and having some sense that people are not the worst thing that they've ever done in their lives.

There's a big movement in the world of folks who wanna humanize everybody to call, to use this sort of terminology. I'm not gonna say much about this, except that when we work... we work a lot with people who've done sexual harm. We've worked a lot with survivors. We work with people who've done sexual harm in prison, we work with them outside, and everything from sexual assault to like, child sexual abuse to rape.

And one thing that's surprising is how like, you got to kind of start from the beginning and be, like, what is socialization, we're all socialized, right? Like, we're socialized into a whole system of thinking and it's sort of a mind blow, I think, for some people to even, like, think about the fact that they have been socialized to believe or feel or act a certain way. And to in that, say that it's not a neutral process, none of us are socialized in a way that's just like, objective, right?

There's no such thing, there's, like, we're socialized to believe certain things about certain people, to think things are better than others, to have rituals.

There are good parts of it, the rituals and the celebration, and there are really horrible parts of it. And so, you know, even in that piece is getting for especially people who've done harm to really understand how gender socialization and male socialization really works, and try to start to pick that apart. And sometimes on the most basic level. And then, of course, you know, I think, you know, what Dara was saying is that we pay so much important attention to race, you know, and racism, and I just wish we did that with all of the other systems of oppression, right?

And patriarchy is one of those that it's just, like, oh, it's patriarchy, you know, and it doesn't get the kind of attention that it really needs, you know, in terms of like, what is this system that's so insidious, that's everywhere, that's in our home, it's in our families, it's in our lives, you know, it's in society.

And I think partly because it's such an intimate system of oppression in - can - in your own family, that it can be some of the hardest things to deal with and the hardest things to talk about.

I'm going to flip through these quickly just because I think people in this room know some things about patriarchy. But I do want to say that, I think, you know, something that happens often around patriarchy with men, particularly, is...happens similarly to race is there's this way that, like, when it's something that it's like, oh, no, I'm a part of that group of people that might be doing something, you know, all these ways. We don't want to own that.

And so we can start to be like, "But you know, women do it too." And, you know, like, "Patriarchy can happen, you know, everybody does it." And it's like, Yes, everyone participates in patriarchy, women, women-assigned, you know, female-identified folks do...a lot of those things are coming from the place of internalized oppression, from being a part of a system where you really don't believe you're as good, and we kind of act like the crabs in a barrel, right? And push each other down. And it's very different when we're coming from a place where there's power, and that's power that's really supported by culture, and history, and ancestry. And so it's not all the same, you know, it's not the same when someone's acting out of an internalized way to harm someone. And it's not the same when it's coming from a place where it's really sanctioned by society.

I think also, as Dara mentioned that, you know...this series of talks is really around having focus on folks who identify as women who are women who are female, perceived as female, so that we're, like, talking about something specific so that we know what we're talking about, and we're on the same page.

So, let's get to the sexual violence piece. So the sexual harm pieces...I think there's something that's kind of interesting in my world where people often both want to separate out sexual harm and also conflate it altogether, and depending on who you are, that happens a lot.

And I think it happens for many reasons. One is because none of it's good, right? It's all bad. It all sucks. It all hurts. And it all has impact. And I can't tell anybody that your experience of being assaulted or harassed is worse than my experience, right? We get into sort of the oppression Olympics in that way, right? That the way we experience impact might actually be the same, something that happened to you and something that happened to me, although they're different, they might feel the same because of our life experiences. So none of us are here to tell each other that what you feel isn't as bad as what somebody else might feel.

At the same time, you know, particularly hearing from people that have, for example, experienced, like, repeated child sexual abuse as children, you know, it's very frustrating for them when things like sexual harassment in the workplace is made equivalent to their experience, right? Because there is also, like, a reality and a degree that we have to grapple with. "How bad was it?" is like a really hard question, right? So, just to name that it's on a spectrum, right? And on the one side - I know you can't see the slides that well, right - So on one side, we have, like, all of the levels of objectification of women from like cat calls to jokes to, you know, all of that type of verbal...verbal harassment.

I can't even see my own damn slides. That's kind of funny, right? I got to get my glasses on. I mean, we could just talk about it.

So as we're moving on, you know, we're kind of getting into, like, things that relate to more violence or more physicality. So, we're talking about...I think pornography is a really complicated one, because there are times that it's okay. And there's times that what we know about pornography is that it just, like, repeatedly objectifies women. It repeatedly makes equivalent sort of hurting a woman with sex and joy in a way that isn't, like, nuanced. So, people I've worked with - men who've done sexual harm - actually have said that one of the things that was really horrible was just the sense of watching so much repeated pornography and really believing that that's something that somebody wanted, right?

So, and then of course as we get to, like, the worst end ends of the spectrum you have rape, and sexual assault, and child sexual abuse. And I know I'm saying these words over and over again, and I'm like, looking out at all of you and just saying, yeah, they're just not easy, right? They're not easy to say, they're not easy to just think about and talk about. And at the same time, it's like, we kind of gotta say it, right? We got to say it to sort of say what we're talking about.

I think one of the things that we do a lot of is, just, connecting sexual harm to patriarchy, right? And just saying that so much of this is not happening in

isolation. It's not happening, you know, just as kind of these one-off violences but there's always, like, causes and conditions that are, like, multiple factors of why sexual harm happens. And a lot of those causes and conditions are related to a system of oppression and patriarchy.

And so just to give you a little story, there was a woman who I worked with who wanted to do a restorative dialogue with the person that did her harm. And he was in prison and she got a notice that he was going up for parole. And so we do these dialogues across sort of harms and we started working with her and one thing that we learned quickly, I mean, what she told us about told me about our life was that, so she was...so like trigger warning again, right? So when she was 16, - and there's consent to tell this story as well - so she was in her family and a group of men came in and they did a home invasion. And then, she was raped in the process. She was 16 years old, and she was the only child in the family who was sexually harmed. And after that, her family kicked her out of the house. She said, "I thought I was gonna get love and support and care," but her family kicked her out. Her family said, "You're damaged now, you know, you're, kind of ruined."

So, she was a straight A student, she went to being homeless, she moved across the country, she had a kid, she had to be isolated from her family. She finally moved back and still couldn't ever get married to her partner because her parents wouldn't give her the blessing to do so. So, she was just pretty much punished for what happened to her, right? It's not an uncommon story, but she lost culture. She lost herself. She lost her family. She lost her community. She lost all sense of who she was, right. Until, like, until she could finally come back to it. So that's not just a sexual harm. If it was, then her family would be, like, "Oh my God, honey, what can I do? And we love you. We support you. Let's help you heal." That's sexual harm in the context of patriarchy. And, you know, that's just sort of... there's endless stories like that. Right?

There was another woman who I met who had recently, finally left her husband...was a... you know, domestic violence situation and her and her daughter left and there was sexual harm in that situation. And, you know,

they spoke up, they spoke out against the family and the family just cut them out, you know, cut them out of the family, took all their resources. They were - she hadn't worked, she was figuring out how to work. So, just, like, the reality of it.

I had a student who's a Samoan student who wrote her paper, you know, on sexual harm. And she - I don't remember what the word is - but she said, there's actually a word that we use in our language that is saying, or a phrase that, that sexual harm just happens in our community.

And it's like normal, you know, and that there, that there's an acceptance of it, you know, so deeply embedded in, like, our framework. And we could go on and on and on, and just sort of, probably from every culture, every standpoint kind of tell stories about, about people who've experienced so much loss. And I think that's where I feel like I don't wanna - I don't feel like I'm being dramatic. Like people die, people lose stuff, you know, like, it's so real. And, like, there's this way that we don't, as a community, like, come in and support that survivor, that person that's lost everything, right? So... So I think that's like on the, really, on the most horrific end of the spectrum.

And then in the process, as we know, while it's all happening, what is the survivor's experience? Oftentimes victim blaming, fear of retaliation, shaming, minimizing, denial, like, this constant barrage of, like, "It didn't really happen. What did you do? You know, like, what could happen in your job if it, if it happened?" Just the constant barrage that, "It is your fault. I didn't do anything wrong. Like, what are you talking about?" And something could happen to you and you could have consequences.

I actually remember going into this prison and we were supposed to start, like, this program there. And I had to go to one of these crazy series of trainings that the prisons do. And they basically said, okay, if you are sexually harassed, you have to report it. And then once you report it, you lose your job [laughing]. I was like, wait. And if you don't report it, you lose your job because you're breaking the rules. And I was like, wait, hold on a second. Right. So you have to report it, you report it. If you don't report it, you're

breaking the rules, you lose your job. That's basically what happens, you know? So it's just, it's maddening, right?

The kind of sense of like retaliation that could happen. When Trump first got elected - feels like a long time ago - but there was a, there was a really good, like, hashtag #WhyWomenDontReport that came out. And it just had like a barrage of like, you know, "I don't report for this reason. I don't talk about it for this reason, because I'll ruin his reputation, because, you know, because I don't have evidence, because he's my boyfriend, because he could've killed me," like, because this, because that - and just, what's amazing about like the Me Too movement, what's fabulous and wonderful and to be celebrated, is, are people coming forward - men, and women, and gender non-conforming folks to say, "Enough, I'm tired of being quiet, It also happened to me."

It also happened to me and there's something about this that's so unspeakable that to speak the unspeakable, to come out of silence, is a part of the healing process for so many people, right? And it's part of creating a movement to make some sort of change. So, you know, to really be celebrating this notion that we need to support survivors in continuing to come, you know, more forward and to say what's happened. I wanna say something about that too, because one thing I noticed when kind of Me Too started, I mean, it's been around for a long time, but when it officially started, right? I was really excited about like random people that would just sort of, like, come up to me and start talking about sexual violence, like, in a way that they never had before. I was sitting on a plane next to this like Indian guy who was from Silicon Valley and this Indian guy that was like from, from Mumbai and they just were like, "What do you think about Me Too?" And, "What do you think about sexual violence?" And I was like, these uncles and cousins, like, they're not really my uncles and cousins - but my uncles and cousins would never have brought the subject up ever. And like, and like, honestly wanted to engage, you know, in a conversation about sexual violence. And of course some things were super naive, but it was the start of something. And so just that level of public conversation that happened...

I think the thing that has been really unfortunate that went into the victim blaming and the retaliation, I don't know if other people have heard this, but when folks would start to say, "Oh, well I've been Me Too'ed" or "He's been Me Too'ed," right? This idea that something happened to the person who did it, right? Like, something happened to him. He's been "Me Too'ed" all of a sudden as opposed to, "You did this to someone else and you just need this, like start to, like, own that and take accountability." But instead it's like, "oh, I got targeted, you know, by all the crazy like women and activists and, like, you know, trans folks and, you know, queer folks out there. And, um, I've been Me Too'ed, you know, and then, yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, that's what happened to me too."

So, you know, and, and like, isn't that the same, isn't that just another form of denial and minimizing and victim blaming and all that stuff, right? By really trying to undercut, like, a really sweet, serious movement and group of people that are trying to say something serious happened to me.

So anyway, we know that sexual harm is a trauma. PTSD. And we know that trauma is, like, creates health consequences, right? Like we know that is true. And I think that's one of those things that we can't underestimate, like, the relationship between trauma and our health. And the loss of, not just self or sleep or panic attacks or whatever it is that's going on, but also like could be real loss of, like, longevity, could be real serious, you know, heart problems, cancer, liver problems, like, things happen to us in consequence of trauma. And I think luckily in the world, the last 10 years, there's been so much great thinking and research on trauma to show those relationships so we take it more seriously.

And I, I think at the same time, because it can sound all doom and gloom is we take it seriously that healing and resiliency can get us some of that back too, right? That, like, coming into healing, being resilient, and that we also know in the world of neuroplasticity that, like, we actually - even as adults - our brains can be rewired and our neurons can fire and we can start to experience a lot of joy and healthiness. And so the goal of it is for joy is for

healing is for happiness is for health, right? That's our goal. Our goal is to be well. And so that's why we need to do all this and talk about this stuff.

So I wanna say something about survivors, just that, you know, one of the things in our work is that they're really at the center. That, you know, the movement now to support survivors is that nobody knows your experience, except you. You're the authorities of your own life experience. What does it mean to support a survivor's agency? That we lead with what you want and what you need, or what we want and what we need, or what I want and what I need, and not what somebody else tells you is good for you, because that's just like really patronizing, but to really believe that people know what they need.

And that culturally, that looks different... age-wise, that looks different... language-wise, that looks different. And so, to not take this kind of dominating approach to even, like, how we support survivors. And that there's no one way to be a survivor. You can be as angry as you want. You could not have no forgiveness. You can be, like, "[expletive] this [expletive], I want this person to rot in prison for the rest of their lives." And that is fine. There is no one way to, like, show up. You can also wake up and have, like, spontaneous forgiveness. We just have different processes. And what we wanna do is, just, support people wherever they are on their healing road and their healing journey to figure out what they want, right? And that, for example, providing some sort of restorative or transformative justice option is just a way to say, "Here's an avenue along with all the other avenues that you have."

I wanna get into sort of the accountability piece of things, because on the flip side of supporting survivors is also walking in relationship to people who've done harm, to take real accountability for the harm that they've caused. And I realized at some point in my life that I didn't feel like my healing was dependent on somebody else suffering. I didn't need the person that did harm to me to go to prison for the rest of their lives. But that's my journey. That's my reality and my truth, right? It wasn't necessary for me. What I really wanted was to kind of just be, like, "Hope this dude heals himself. Like hope

he figures out why he did what he did. Like, I hope he, you know, like comes, comes to the light, you know, like I hope that happens, and I hope he doesn't hurt more people." That's really what I wanted.

And so I'm gonna talk a little bit about, like, more specifically about this journey to accountability. So this coming into accountability, I want to kind of break it up into a few parts. To talk about, like, what is accountability? Because a lot of the word is thrown around so much like, oh, this is accountability that, well, what really is accountability? How do we get there? How do we actually get to accountability? What gets in the way? And then the impacts of accountability. What can happen if somebody in your life is accountable?

So, first of all, to be really clear, we're talking about interpersonal accountability. We're not talking about, like, systems accountability, or community accountability. We're not talking about this, like, all of, like, the United States needs to be accountable for atrocities, right? We know that there are huge systems out there that need to be accountable, but we're talking about harm right now that's interpersonal. And I think what's amazing about accountability is, like, in the most wonderful and magical of its expression, it's saying that, like, you know, it's choosing humanity. It's choosing relationship. It's choosing to want to be in relationship to yourself and to others. It's choosing to say, "I wanna be here. I wanna, I wanna be in this with you." And that's probably the most - instead of the words like amends and reparations and remorse, you know - I would say that's the most magical part about accountability.

But within it, it's really about taking responsibility. It's about remorse. It's about making amends, if possible. It's about dignity. It's about listening. Those are really the things that are at the center of accountability. So the other thing about accountability is it's not, like, "All these bad people out there and they need to be accountable." We all hurt people all day, every day, all the time, in little ways, and big ways. And, like, conflict and harm is normal. It's just a part of our lives. We do it and we also have to learn to be accountable, right?

So it's like a community effort. It's, like, as we're learning how to put on a seatbelt, you know, like, that's something that happens. Everybody walks in their car and they put on a seatbelt. Why don't we also say, like, "Oh yeah, we should all be accountable. Or we should all have emotional intelligence." The things that should be kind of really everyday things that we do. So it's not about anything that somebody has to do out there. It's a lot about what we also need to do in here.

And... So what is accountability, right? So I'd say the first thing that without, like, having self-awareness that something, like, imagine a moment that you've done something to hurt someone else, right? Like, I can think of something that happened recently where it was a work colleague and... we were in a staff meeting and something happened at the end of the meeting where, like, everybody forgot that I hadn't checked in and started walking away. And I got, like, really triggered and I just kind of, like, shut down and got kind of angry. And another meeting happened and I kind of reacted to a request in a way that was, like, overreaction. It was to the same person. And afterwards, you know, she said to me, like, "wow" - you know she was new, you know - she was, like, "I hope that's not who you are, like every day." And I was, like, "Oh my God, no, that's not who I am every day. Like, I definitely had something going on and I'm, you know, really sorry that I - that this is what you saw of me. And I just kind of overreacted." And so when she was telling me, like, you were doing this, of course at first, I was like, "What the [expletive], [expletive] you. I don't do this [expletive]. Like, don't you know all the pressure I'm under, like, no!" You know? And so, like, there's a piece of me that's, like, annoyed and angry and wanting to find fault with everything that she's saying, right?

And I take a little more time and I'm, like, "Oh, Hmm. Maybe I need to sit back and actually think about what was going on right then, like, what was happening? Why was I doing that?" And at the same time thinking, "Oh, I had an action or behavior that hurt this person, you know? And I do need to be responsible to that."

So, without that level of, like, critical self-reflection and trying to understand why.... we can't get to accountability, right? Without being able to stop and go inside and be, like, what just happened? It won't happen. I mean, I don't think it will happen. It might happen for you, but it didn't happen for me. So stopping and pausing, self-reflecting, trying to understand why, and then also not making it about you in front of that person, right? Like, it's about them and really showing that it's about them. So that's the piece about remorse and a desire to actually be in relationship and make things right.

So in the bare, in the very minimal essence of accountability, in any fight that you have with your mother, your brother, your partner, you know, your friend, like there's that moment of pausing and being like, and then sometimes it's really complicated 'cause we're all hurting each other, right? But then there's a moment to try to pick it apart and see what's really going on.

And then I wanna say that there's something about also finding, like, right-size accountability, because in there's a culture here of, like, there can be a culture of like, and I hate I, this is gonna be maybe hard for some people, but, like, victim manipulation where something happens to you and it's like the worst thing in the world, and you did all these things to me and it's, like, one little thing that that person did to you and you don't have to apologize for their whole lives, right?

So there's something about what's the right-size accountability? What do you know is right? Like, "Oh, I really did this much to you, right? Like I didn't do all these things, you know, I did this much to you." And if they're going through a process, that's not yours to carry. That's not yours to hold, right? So we all have to figure out how to be in relationship to each other.

And then also understanding that what's really common in accountability is to sort of...people to kind of ping pong between, like, denial and over-apology. And neither one is accountable. Denial, we know, right? "Oh, I didn't do that. What you talking about?" That's like, you know, and probably sometimes depending on the person you might be in denial, and then depending on somebody else you might be in over-apology.

The other one is - and I'm sure people, I'm sure people have experienced this - kind of like you are trying to tell somebody, "Hey, this happened to me." And they're like, "Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I can't believe I did that to you. I'm a horrible person. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God." And it's all about them. It's not about you. It's not. And you're like, "Okay, now I'm just gonna sit here and listen to you talk about yourself for the next half an hour and clearly this is not about me, right?" And that's not accountable. And maybe that person's shame-spiraling, right? It's just a barrage of shame that's happening. Maybe in denial there's also shame. Shame is pretty common, you know, underlying sort of a lot of those things. So just to be aware, even in yourself, when you notice, "Oh God, I'm really like over-apologizing and making it all about myself, right?" Or just noticing kind of like in yourself or with somebody else kind of what's going on.

So how do we get to accountability? How does... let's go to more severe kind of harms. How does someone who's done a harm get to being accountable? How do any of us get to, like, bigger, bigger harms?

So we have a saying in our work about hurt, people, hurt people.

I'm sure a lot of people have heard it, which is just this idea that, like, when you have a lot of unprocessed trauma, plus environmental factors, plus systems of oppression, plus historical stuff that's happened to you, and you haven't had any space to process it, to go through it, to be supported, to feel safe...that like things can lead to that... all of that stuff can lead to acting out and hurting other people or acting in and hurting yourself.

So there's like a common relationship between like lack of resources, trauma, unprocessed trauma, all this stuff and acting in or acting out and perhaps, you know, doing violence to others. And so something about coming to accountability is starting to pick apart and unwind what are all of those things that happened in my life that led to me doing this harm? And it's not a process that's necessarily, like, something your survivor wants to hear,

although they might, you know, but it's a process where people need to go through their own accountability on their own.

So I'm gonna tell you a story for myself, which is, like, when I got to college - actually probably started when I was like in 11th grade, I went to this camp in Maine and we went to Canada and this other woman I was in camp with, like, taught me how to shoplift. And we, like, went around a mall shoplifting and I was like, sort of got addicted to it. It's true. I mean, and it's not good. Right? Like I, then, like, CVS, like, you know, Duane Reade, like in my senior year. And then I went to Brown, and we shoplifted from the Brown bookstore. There's five women of color, we were all shoplifting from the Brown bookstore. That should tell you something about what we weren't dealing with, making excuses like, "Well, it's the man anyway, whatever who the [expletive] cares?" You know?

And then I came back to New York and I still was shoplifting. And I was teaching in a junior high school. And I was teaching Spanish and Art. And I was teaching for kids in risk. All kids of color. I was teaching for my junior high school history teacher who was the only Black female principal in the whole district. And I went, like I was like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, right? Like, I was straight A student like, like, you know, I was always like overachiever, perfect person. But because I hadn't dealt with all this stuff, I was trying to find a way I was just acting out, right? I was just like, I just need to do something wrong because I know that this is not, like, this isn't everything. And I'm doing this thing and I haven't explored this other thing, right? So, like, I was acting out.

I'm gonna get to this later, but there was a moment where I was like in first year teaching and I was, like, midyear. And I was like, standing in a Duane Reade was about to take something and I like stopped myself. And I was like, "If one of those kids walked in right now, I will never be able to look myself in, like, in a mirror again." And I stopped and I never shoplifted again.

And there's some later piece in here about how - believe it or not - a sense of responsibility to others, feeling like you're a part of something can actually

help you stop, like, doing things, like can actually help you be accountable before you even know what the words of accountability are.

Just being in community, knowing you belong to something, you are responsible to people...and that was before I ever knew anything about this, but once I started learning about this stuff, I was like, oh my God, I did that too. You know, that was me. The point of this slide though, is about saying that I did harm, you know, and that there were reasons why, and it's not to minimize the actions, but there is a time and a place to explain, also, so that I don't do it again, right?

So that's, that's what, like, on let's say my level, that's what I can share. And it took me a long time to share it. I was so embarrassed and so ashamed for so long because that persona of, oh, you're the speaker who started a nonprofit, you know, whatever, like, you know, it's that persona. And I was like, no, I'm not perfect. I'm really effed up. And I've done lots of things. And we all have. And we should just talk about them because, you know, it all relates to kind of what we need to be talking about.

So, I wanna say also that causes are not, like, unique. Like, you know, they're not singular. They're complex, they're compounded, they're often many causes of why do people do sexual harm. So, like, moving now into why people might do sexual harm... and that it's really great to explore, like, all the different things: childhood grief, loss, guilt, power and control, shame, addiction. Like, there's just so many factors out there that - and for different people, there'll be different things that come to play.

It's really important in this work to really look at trauma and accountability separately. Like, when someone's talking about trauma, even if they've done harm, we're talking about trauma, we're talking about them. We're talking about they're human, you know, human, like what happened to you? We weren't born to hurt people. 99.9% of people, right? We're not born saying, "I'm gonna go out and commit a crime and then go to prison or, you know, get myself in trouble." So like, do we care, like really holding that dignity of that person and understanding trauma.

And then when it's time to talk about accountability, it's time to talk about accountability. I mentioned this, separating the self from the act really helps people. So, one thing is particularly around sexual harm - and this might be hard for people to hear - but because we demonize folks that have done sexual harm quite a bit, you know, and some people who've then been, like, convicted of it will really feel the monstrosity of, like, "I'm a monster and I'm nothing else." Like, it's almost, it's really difficult to be accountable when you just think you're a monster and you can't separate out what you did. So that separation is actually really important to getting to accountability. And that working on this stuff, like, processing trauma and harm helps us to create, like, a new narrative of who we are, right? So that's the other side of healing.

So other things that really help people with getting to be accountable is, like, a lot of times folks that have experienced a lot of lack of resources or trauma that, you know, once that you feel empathy, like once people start to empathize with you, it's actually more easier. It's, like, easier to empathize with others, so there is a process of like first, what we do is really focus on your survivorship. And once that feels tended to, we can focus more on what you've done and that sort of empathy process becomes easier for folks to have for others. And then of course connecting it to all of the structural harms and structural oppressions, inequities.

I'm gonna skip these [slides].

So what gets in the way of being accountable? For a lot of people, shame. As we said...trauma, lack of self-reflection, right? Not really having that sort of... we don't, like, our culture isn't built in to be self-reflective and to be, like, what do I really feel right now? Like, we don't have. Like, the way the seatbelt is there or whatever. Like, we don't have that. Like, we don't build it into our culture, you know, like let's be emotionally intelligent, like, so that a negative sense of self, having a really black and white belief system like it's this, or it's that it's I'm bad or I'm good, you know, that can be really hard because a lot of this processing stuff is very gray area. Oppression and then of course not great life choices.

And then what can be the impact of accountability is really an amazing sense of like healing yourself, healing other parties that are involved, a new sense of self, a sense of beloved relationship and belonging. And oftentimes people who've really gone through a process of being accountable to feel like it's actually quite liberating and wanting others to experience that kind of liberation.

So this I'm talking about in the context of, like, restorative justice, restorative practices, and most people have heard that word, which is, you know, most simply put, a paradigm to heal and address harm rooted in people, community, and relationships. So community solutions and relationships, and why would a survivor, for example, want to maybe talk with the person that has done them harm that, you know, a lot of people kind of ask that question.

And, you know, for some folks it's just really a part of their healing journey. For a lot of survivors, it's wanting to hear the truth, you know, in the own words of the person that did them harm, it's wanting to hear remorse, it's wanting to tell their story. It's wanting to ask questions, it's wanting to be listened to, it's wanting to ask questions that only that person can actually hear. And then of course, you know, a sense that, you know, not wanting that person to actually ever have, ever harm again.

So a couple more things. And then I think I'm gonna kind of stop is just, we talked about like healing and we talked about accountability and now there's like a sweet relationship between healing and accountability, like a sweet, beautiful sense of how they, how they are related. And I guess I wanna start with the thing that it happens in relationship to each other, right? Like it happens be like, like this is, we're all talking about things that happen in relationship to each other.

We can heal alone. We can heal also in nature, we can hear, we can heal in many different ways.

And there's a really sweet story that I've told a few times of a woman I met in Canada. She's from the Heiltsuk Nation. They have a restorative justice center there. And she said that, like, "Oh, as soon as somebody, like, does something - a harm, everybody in the community knows, right? Like you can't not know cause it's a small town of like 3,000 people." And what they have is a cabin in the woods, and the person that did the harm goes for a week to a month to nine months to the cabin. And they're visited once a week and they confront themselves and they're in nature. And she said they confront their ghosts. They're supported by a mentor. And there's a real sense of, like, nature as a place to be accountable, nature to confront your ghosts, nature as a place to heal while you're being supported by some mentorship, you know?

So there's so many creative ways to do this kind of healing and accountability work. And there's not just one way. And, you know, just to say that that piece about nature can be a big one. And if we translate that to an urban environment, like, something that we should think about is what's our cabin in the woods, right? What can we create where people can have some time, um, that might, they might need to be away because the survivor needs to be safe.

And what can we do? I mentioned this about deepening with empathy, right? That the relationship between empathy and healing and accountability is strong.

I told you my little story about a sense of responsibility, but I'll tell you another one, which I really loved... which is how I learned that about my experience — my shoplifting experience. But I had a great opportunity to spend time with, you know, some really sweet peacemakers in the Navajo Nation. And one of them, when it really clicked for me, he was telling this story about somebody in his community who had a lot of addiction issues, had been in and in and out of jail, was on parole, and kind of came home and came to him - he was a probation, parole officer, and said like, you know, he kept sending them to different like treatment facilities and nothing was working. And then they started talking and they said, "Oh yeah, actually. Where's your

mom from?" "Oh, my mom's a traditional Navajo woman. She lives in Shiprock. And, you know, she really follows traditional ways." And so he said, "Okay, I'm gonna sentence you to 30 days with your mother. I want you to go. And I want you to learn everything about her and where you're from and just talk to her every day. That's what I want you to do." And he went and he spent 30 days with his mother and he came back and the guy said like, "Did you use?" And he was like, "No." He's like, "Did you smoke?" He was like, "No." He's like, "Okay, I want you to do another 60 days with your mom." So he went back, he spent another 60 days. And that was actually the thing that stopped him from, you know, stopped the cycle for him, right?

So very common in Indigenous peacemaking practices is a sense of, like, knowing where you're from and how that creates accountability and stops your behavior, right? I mean, it's like common knowledge, right? If we kind of know where we're from and we belong to something, then we don't wanna hurt it because we, like, somebody cares about or, we're in love with something it's not, but we forget that these things are just so, like, oh my God, right?

Another peacemaker said that the first thing that she did when young people would come into her office is that she would start naming your relatives, just like naming your kinship and your clanship. And this is your uncle. And you know, this is your cousin, this is this. And even those words like this is your uncle, and this is your cousin. This is where you're from. Like what that did to help people feel a sense of belonging.

I also wanna say, what I have noticed is in our urban world, is that the more... like it's not, you know, there's a culture of... I love therapy. I have a therapist who I love to death. She's the best. And I've known her for 10 years. And, and one on one, like, stuff works for me really well. And there's a way that, like, the mental health, like, system or industrial complex, sometimes, has made common, everyday people feel like the only way to heal is through a professional and to be diagnosed in a certain way, or that there's something wrong with you.

And you have, like, you know, the DSM has told you what's wrong with you, but...so there's a real movement in our work - collective work towards coming into, like, community practice that we used to sit around a kitchen table and we used to help each other heal. And just by being, like, what's up son. Like, "How you doing mama? Like how you feeling? What's going on with you? Right? Like, what's happening?" And that, like, there's, like, we know how to do that. And that we don't need to be stripped of, like, this stuff getting taken away from us.

So what does it mean to, like, reclaim community healing, to reclaim the community practice where we do sit around together in a circle, on a table, in a community, in a group - call it whatever you want. And we just talk. And I'll tell you from my 15 years of experience doing this work in really urban environments with super multiracial people, don't have to be in a Navajo Nation, Indigenous community. It works, right? Like people feel loved and there's a sense of community and belonging. And also there's something powerful about, like, when you're witnessed and what that does to people who are witnessing you also helps you heal, the witness also heals the bystander, also experiences healing. And honestly, when someone tells their story, it, it often gives other people courage to do it too. And to feel like they can get that courage to do it. So that's a really big piece.

And of course, like all of this stuff, it's kind of about slowing time down a little bit. So, you know, as you know, if we barely know each other, I'm probably not gonna tell you the worst thing I ever did, right? I don't really know you, I don't trust you with my info. But the more we get to know each other, the more I'm gonna be willing to go there, right? And that takes time. So to not rush, like relationship and time can deepen our healing and our accountability in your group of people, or in your family, or whatever as you start to do some sort of process or work.

Another really sweet thing is that, you know, what I've seen for people who've done a lot of really serious harm that...where self-forgiveness is really, really hard, and that kind of monster feeling lives inside, is that coming into, like,

self-forgiveness can actually create the conditions for the person to even be more accountable. Because if you're in the monster place and the shame-spiral, then it's the over-apology. And, "Oh my God, I'm just a horrible person," right? But if you're in a place of like, "I'm not a horrible person, I'm not the worst thing in the world, you know, I'm - there's something good about me and I did this bad thing," you know, it's more possible to be accountable.

And then just one last story about, you know, being reminded of your good qualities can actually also help with accountabilities. So this other woman from Canada, the Nisga'a Nation, she also met her on a trip. And she was telling us a story about when domestic violence happens in their community. First of all, they bring all the people, the houses together, she said, meaning different clans together. And then the people that did harm and the survivors actually don't speak for a long time. First, like, the heads speak. Like, the heads of the clan, then the mothers and fathers speak, then the like friends and cousins speak. And everybody's first talking about how they remember the good things about the two people that are sitting there. What they remember is good about them. Not that, like, oh, it's good and you guys just work it out and make it better, you know? And then the two speak about the harm that happened, right? So that the harm is also being addressed in the context of family and the larger community. And that what's good is not being lost.

So... I think I said most of what I wanted to say. and I just wanna say that there's like, what's really important is that there's no one way to be accountable, right? There's no cookie cutter way. There's no, these were, these are all like the elements, right? These are all the things that people have said, the things that we've experienced, the things that we've heard, the things I've experienced personally, and that all of these different elements and how they play together.

So I think I wanna end there and I wanna not go through all these ones because there's like too many of them. [laugh] And I just wanna say this last thing, which is about, this is one of my favorite quotes by a friend of mentor of mine about just how paradigm shifts take time. And the notion that we can

act with the urgency of tomorrow and also the patience of a thousand years. Because we're what we're trying to be in it for the long haul. Right? We're trying to like see the importance of changing it now, as well as have patience for how long it will take. And that's kind of what I have to say today.