

In Conversation with Judy Norsigian

Transcript

September 2023

Sandro Galea:

Good day. Thank you for joining us. My name is Sandro Galea. I have the privilege of serving as Dean of School of Public Health at Boston University. Welcome to our latest Public Health Conversation Starter. This is a series of discussions we are having with thinkers who provide a critical perspective on the work of public health.

In 2021, our school hosted an event celebrating 50 years since the first publication of *Our Bodies Ourselves*. The book has provided generations of women information that helps support their health, much of which was not easily available when the book was first published. I'm delighted today to be joined by Judy Norsigian, co-founder of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, also known as the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. From 2001-2015, she also served as executive director of the organization. From 2018-2023, she was chair of the board of directors. She has coauthored, edited nine editions of *Our Bodies Ourselves* and has also serve as an adjunct faculty member at Suffolk University. Judy, welcome. Really, thank you for spending time with us.

Judy Norsigian:

It's a pleasure to join you as always.

Sandro Galea:

Thank you, Judy. So let me just start with a bit of a background question. Can you guide us through your background, how you came to be doing what you ended up doing?

Judy Norsigian:

Well, most of it was serendipity, I have to admit. I graduated in 1970 and I was involved with the Harvard Strike, with the protests, with all of the issues that were front and center at that point, and concerned with peace, with civil rights, not so much with the Women's Movement. I have to admit, that came to me really in '71 when I met the women in *Our Bodies Ourselves*. But I was always gravitating towards social justice causes, and that comes from my background as an Armenian girl growing up in Watertown. My father was not one of the silent parents who couldn't discuss the genocide. He really taught me a lot about what it meant to stand up for what you believe in. And during the strike when we all had our red armbands at our graduation in 1970, he turned to me and he said, "The only real revolutionaries are the Black Panthers. Watch all of your classmates will be in these cushy jobs in a few years. Let's see how many of them are on the streets then."

It was a very interesting conversation. But anyway, that's what got me launched. When I met the women in the group, just simply through an acquaintance, I fell in love with them. And my first meeting was in September of 1971. This is before we had incorporated it as a nonprofit organization. Right around the time where there was discussion about doing a new newsprint edition of the book, the first had come out in December of '70 with the *New England Free*

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Press, and we were at that point being wooed by commercial publishers such as Random House and Simon & Schuster. So there was a lively conversation about whether to engage with the capitalists in the service of reaching a mass audience or to stay true to our politics and stick with the New England Free Press. A fascinating conversation.

Sandro Galea:

It's interesting how that conversation still goes on today, isn't it? Obviously, *Our Bodies Ourselves* was instrumental in terms of making information about health related issues for women in particular widely available. I feel like we're talking 2023 where information seems to be everywhere and it's hard to remember what 50 years ago was like in terms of information. Can you just guide us through what was information like then and how did *Our Bodies Ourselves* come in and have such an important role?

Judy Norsigian:

Well, first of all, there wasn't much information. It was really a desert out there, and one of the things that happened at that 1969 Women's Liberation Conference held at Emmanuel College is that one workshop led by Nancy Miriam Hawley was talking about the fact that we knew so little about our bodies, that physicians were largely the ones we turned to, and they were condescending, paternalistic, and sexist. So you often didn't get information you needed, and then when you did, it was sometimes wrong. Although we didn't know that much about what was wrong back then in 1969, '70. The group that kept meeting after this conference embarked upon a wonderful self-education project. They turned to Countway Medical Library at Harvard. They began to meet in local groups in the Boston area to talk about hot topics around sexuality, pregnancy, even sexually transmissible infections, which we called VD back in those days, venereal disease.

There was so much to talk about and so little that was out there of good quality that the women realized quickly they had to gather this information, share it. And it became a work in progress. It was never finalized because we always knew that more experiences, more knowledge was needed to guide us in making good decisions, both about our personal health issues, but also about the political issues. What are the policies out there? Back then, men weren't even allowed in the delivery room for a while and hospitals had to change their policies about how women could give birth. Much of that changed, some of it didn't. Some of it got worse, some of it got better.

Over the years though, we began to see that so much of what was done in the name of medicine, particularly when it came to drugs and surgical procedures, had not been well tested when it came to women, that we were often being extrapolated from research that was done on men or there were assumptions about what women needed and wanted. We needed to go back a few steps and really talk to women and see what our needs were and what it was that would make the most sense even in terms of research. We did help shape some of their Women's Health Research Agenda with the Office of Research on Women's Health throughout

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the nineties, and we were active in a number of policy changes. I can tell you a funny story in a minute about birth centers in Boston, but there's no end of issues. We took on things that women brought to us, things that emerged in our own lives. It was really a good example of how the personal became political and vice versa in the larger Women's Movement and certainly in the Women's Health Movement of which we were a part.

Sandro Galea:

Tell me the story about Boston Health Centers.

Judy Norsigian:

Well, this is a wonderful story because it involves a CEO of a local hospital who has since come around. So I will name him. His name is Dr. Mitchell Rabkin, and we had a board meeting of the Health Systems Agency 4 right here in Boston, the health planning councils that were developed as part of the Health Planning Act that Congress passed, and we were all supposed to be better at planning systems so we wouldn't duplicate. We would have services where they were needed. Well, as part of the health systems plan for HSA4, some of us on the board, I was a board member then, advocated that we build in a freestanding birth center for Greater Boston. There is a wonderful moment at this board meeting where Dr. Rabkin gets up and says, "I don't care if women want to give birth in cabbage patches."

And it was something that was humorous, and yet it was also... For some of us looking at the data and there were good data. Already Judith Rooks had published in the New England Journal of Medicine with their colleagues. We were already seeing freestanding birth centers showing their merit across the country. We did get that in to the health systems plan. It didn't mean that we got a birth center anytime soon. As you well know, the first freestanding birth center for Boston proper will be the neighborhood birth center, which will be opening in a little over a year. We're all very excited about that as they passed the \$3 million fundraising mark recently. And it is a project led by women of color who have been really talking seriously for a long time about how we need to make birthing options safer, more respectful, especially for women of color.

The birth center is happening. At the moment, as you know, we have only one functioning birth center in Massachusetts, and that is the Seven Sisters Midwifery Birth Center in Northampton, in Florence, Massachusetts. The North Shore Birth Center closed permanently, and that was something a number of us fought. We lost that battle. The Cambridge Birth Center was closed during the pandemic. A very bad decision when you consider that's when you most need birth centers to keep healthy pregnant women out of the hospital. We wrote op-eds in The Globe. We tried hard, but that birth center is still closed, but it will be reopening. There's been some substantial funding secured, and we're very happy to see that happening and hoping that a community group will be actively working on that.

And then maybe there'll be other birth centers. We think we need one in Lowell, we need one in southeastern Massachusetts. There are many women across the state who'd love to see

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them. Maybe Worcester. And that's one of the projects that Our Bodies Ourselves in other groups in the birthing and racial justice arena are hoping will come to fruition in the next few years.

Sandro Galea:

That builds nicely in the next question. Tell me, 50 years later, what's the future for Our Bodies Ourselves in the next 50 years? The world is dramatically different in terms of access to information, in terms of how we think about a lot of healthcare for all people, but particularly health for women.

Judy Norsigian:

Right. Well, as you know, back then there was nothing. And then all of a sudden we've got the internet and we've got so much junk that the public is inundated with information, particularly for girls and women and others like transgendered individuals, people who really need good information, are getting crap on the internet for the most part. Steering people into the right direction is the challenge. Several years back, we realized that we probably weren't going to do another print book like Our Bodies Ourselves. The last one came out in 2011. Simon & Schuster is still selling copies because some of the information is still quite useful and current.

But we realized that most individuals seek the kind of information in this book on the internet. So we decided to shift over and emphasize the development of good content at our website. Several years ago, we created an MOU with Suffolk University, and they have been operating the website. It's called Our Bodies Ourselves Today. Currently, we're in very serious conversations with Suffolk so that there'll be a complete merger by sometime this fall where our advocacy work and our work with global partners. As you know, we have more than 34 translation adaptations of Our Bodies Ourselves and the most recent one came out in Brazil just earlier this year, also available as a PDF file. It's a marvelous example of community groups collaborating with those in academia to produce a really solid resource that reflects community needs, the best available information out there.

This is what we're hoping to pursue in the future, that there'll be more translation adaptations. And that with a complete merger, it would all be done under the umbrella of Suffolk at the Center for Women's Health and Human Rights. This is a very exciting development because as you know, fundraising for nonprofits is not easy. We wanted a secure place for not just the website to flourish, but also the advocacy work and the global initiatives, and it looks like it's going to be a marvelous partnership. Some of our board members have committed to maintaining a voluntary role going forward, particularly as Suffolk increases its budget there.

I will note that a very generous donor made the website possible with an endowment of \$2 million several years ago, and that's partly why we could see the website launch. We're going to be very excited with the new content coming in with some of the new individuals working in the verticals, as we call them. These are committees that work on different content areas and that kind of vetting of what's out there already. Because there is good information out on the

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internet, but it's hard to find it. What we see as our task here is to locate the best information, shine a spotlight on it, and have it be featured at Our Bodies Ourselves website.

Sandro Galea:

That's fantastic. As you move more to digital Our Bodies Ourselves, I imagine that 50 years ago, 1970, '71, the audience for Our Bodies Ourselves was strictly American. Now because, A, the world is globalized, but B, because you're digital, it's a global audience. And of course, the global need for information about health generally, women's health specifically, is a dramatically different phases in different parts of the world. I'm actually curious about how you handle that, how you think about that. How do you think about being relevant and to have this sort of impact that you had nationally, globally?

Judy Norsigian:

Well, we did not think up all these global projects. What happened is that women in different countries, regions discovered the book and said, "Ah, we're going to remake this to be culturally and linguistically relevant for women and men and others in our communities." So every one of these projects was generated by those outside of the United States. In one case, I will say, there's a Farsi edition that was started by Iranian women in this country because if they tried to do something like that in Iran at that point, they would all be in very serious trouble. There were a few cases where diasporans worked on a project. But there are women in Morocco now, women in Mongolia, women in other countries who've expressed interest in working on new projects. Some of them had started and stopped, and they want to start again. When you think about it, the Brazilian projects started decades ago, but it didn't ever get completed, and it took this wonderful collaboration of faculty and two of the largest universities with the community group, the Coletivo in São Paulo, which we had known for decades to produce this new and wonderful resource. But it's very clear that we cannot drive this. This has to be driven by women and others in their communities. We can provide support. Sometimes we've been able to find a donor, someone from that region who wants to support this effort. Sometimes we can provide graphics and some technical support, but mostly this is being done by groups in other countries, and the need still continues. There's no question this information is vital.

I even have to point out that in this country, particularly when it comes to human sexuality information, we have gone backwards. That recent article in the Washington Post about that wonderful sexuality educator in Michigan who was pilloried for the work she did. And by the way, this is a religious woman who goes to church, and she is astounded by the way she's been attacked. And it's not just the conservatives who don't believe in talking openly about sex or about abortion. This is really about those who are attacking democracy right now, finding every single wedge that they can and using these as issues. The same with the transgender issue. There are folks using transphobia for their ends, destroying democracy when they don't really care about trans issues, but they see it as a way to galvanize a conservative public, to get them

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to participate in some of the more nefarious schemes to shut down democracy, access to voting, all the things that we care about.

Sandro Galea:

That's a segue to my last two questions. Number one, what advice would you have for people earlier in their career and life trajectory who care about these issues, care about issues of women's healthcare, care about the issues of trans health? What advice would you have for them now as they look to figure out how they can make the best contribution possible?

Judy Norsigian:

I think when you're young, you really don't know a lot about what is going to grab you. I certainly didn't. It was meeting these women that made the difference for me. I think it makes sense to intern, volunteer with groups in your area that are doing good work, work that attracts you, whether it's about the climate crisis or sexual and reproductive health, whatever is your interest area. I know from working with interns and volunteers in their early twenties, and this is over several decades, that those experiences working not just with us, but with the National Women's Health Network and other organizations, nonprofits for the most part, made a huge difference in helping them decide what it was they were going to pursue. Some of them decades later are doing very meaningful work.

We still maintain our connections with faculty at BU. For example, one of our close colleagues in Nepal, a physician, semi-retired, is coming back to the states and we're trying to work out a scheme where she can connect with some of the students at BU and elsewhere to share much of her wisdom garnered over many decades of activism and working in rural areas and politically savvy and well-placed efforts to address the gender-based violence issue. Those are the kinds of things that will continue where I think students and people in their early twenties do well to connect with nonprofits, to see what they're up to, to follow them, to volunteer with them, to see what will make a good fit.

Sandro Galea:

My last question. What gives you hope?

Judy Norsigian:

This generation. The ones that I'm in contact with, late teens, early twenties, sometimes early thirties, they inspire me every day. Some of them have been volunteers working on our birthing justice issues. Some of them have worked in the space around gene editing and reprogenetics, and the concerns we have about the harvesting of eggs from young women who need the money for graduate school and have no clue about the risk they're taking. Many, many young people are getting involved in these causes that have not yet become as mainstream as they should be. I am seeing myself as a facilitator of that work. Not because anything is kept in this brain, which is losing so much memory, but because in my computer I have saved a lot of good

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info. I'm happy to share it and do. But it's the next generation that's leading the way and doing it with social media, with careful thought, with an understanding of the bad actors out there, much more politically sophisticated than I was in my early twenties.

Sandro Galea:

Judy, as you know, I'm deeply admiring what you've done and what you continue to do. Thank you for all that. Thank you for what you've done, what you do, and thank you for joining us. I really enjoyed talking.

Judy Norsigian:

My pleasure as always.