



Profile

Terry McGovern: reforming sexual and reproductive justice training



Terry McGovern is an internationally renowned human rights lawyer and researcher on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender justice, and environmental justice. In July, 2023, she became Senior Associate Dean for Academic and Student Affairs at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, New York, NY, USA, and is developing a sexual and reproductive justice programme that can “offer a concentration that is much more multidisciplinary, much more interrogating of the upstream factors causing inequity in health outcomes, injecting critical thinking into every aspect of the training, but critical thinking across disciplines beyond the silo of maternal child health disparities”, she says.

Before her move to CUNY, McGovern was the Chair of the Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health in New York. There her work focused on health and human rights and she became concerned about the “emphasis on disparities rather than solutions and the way that public health is really siloed. I thought we needed to go much further and start mixing disciplines and start training students to develop solutions. They need critical thinking. They need to know who’s not in the datasets...and about what was happening, which was a total disregard for maternal child health and obsession with restricting bodily autonomy”, she says. Some of her former students work in government health departments in the USA and abroad and McGovern is “extremely grateful that I’ve had the opportunity to impact the generations who are now out there”. At CUNY, she is keen to share her knowledge with students, many of whom are racially minoritised or overseas students.

McGovern was raised in Long Island, NY, USA, by her Irish Catholic parents who were “more left of centre than traditional Irish Catholics”, she says. From a young age, she recalls challenging authority. At her Catholic girls’ school, she “constantly asked complicated questions about why were we being bused to an anti-abortion rally and why the nuns had such lower status than the priests”, McGovern recalls. Going to the State University of New York broadened her experiences and outlook: “I became pretty political and also was carrying a lot of anger about the ways that I had seen the church and others really violate human rights.” McGovern went on to study law at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, USA. “It was a lot of cases about property and contracts and no narrative on who the people were...So I immediately realised I was only going to survive this experience if I started to do work that I cared about”, she recalls. McGovern found work that resonated during an internship representing migrants.

After passing the Bar examination, she worked for legal services and became an HIV lawyer at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Early on, she represented women who were

HIV positive but were being denied Medicaid and social security disability insurance because they did not meet the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) definition for AIDS. Founding the HIV Law Project in 1989, she worked with women with HIV, doctors, and activists who realised the CDC’s definition of AIDS was based on analysis of one portion of the affected population, white gay men. In October, 1990, McGovern successfully litigated against the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Social Security Administration (SSA) for discrimination and violating their mandate. The litigation, along with a country-wide grassroots activist campaign, led to the CDC expanding their definition of AIDS and the SSA broadening their eligibility criteria. The case informed her future work, “understanding that science is not unbiased, that what is happening upstream is really important. So we need to...look at how policy is formulated. We need many disciplines and we need to centre community. That lawsuit was successful because I was working with doctors, community activists, and the women themselves were in the lead”, she says. Natalia Kanem, the Executive Director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), comments: “Terry has devoted her career to advancing the rights of structurally disadvantaged populations—globally and in the US...Her work with the HIV Law Project was groundbreaking, rooted in the belief that we all have equal rights, including the right to live with dignity and respect. She has changed so many lives for the better.” Having worked closely with doctors during her legal career, McGovern moved to the Mailman School of Public Health in 1999 and became interested in a multidisciplinary approach to health. “I got really interested in combining disciplines and teaching public health differently through the lens of what I’d seen”, she says.

Turning to women’s health now, McGovern is frank about the impact of abortion bans in several US states. “It is absolutely stunningly heart-breaking what’s going on...We are now seeing deaths, and I’m sure those are just the ones that are surfacing”, she says. McGovern believes wide-ranging policies are needed to make a difference for women and children and she would like to see political leaders “broaden the conversation. It’s not just about restoring Roe v Wade, it’s actually setting right this longer set of connections. This is not just about abortion. This is about a whole set of interacting factors. We are not holding states accountable for refusing to invest in maternal and child health or their unwillingness to invest in sexuality education and pregnancy prevention training, or accountable for foster care systems rife with abuses”, she explains. “I don’t feel like the conversation goes deep enough, and so I feel like they’re missing opportunities.”

Udani Samarasekera