

# "Our Movements Suffer as We Do": Ending Abuse in Activist Communities

February 15, 2012

MY FRIEND, A YOUNG, RADICAL WOMAN of color, is frustrated. She has been participating in our local contingent of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and has been accused of perpetrating "hate speech" for gently reminding white men in the group that they should share space with women. She has watched women and people of color leave meetings after being silenced. She can't decide whether to keep fighting or quit. Across the country, in spaces occupied by "the 99%," women are finding themselves marginalized or harassed. When they organize, creating blogs like Occupy Patriarchy, they are accused of hindering the movement and hating men. Implicitly or explicitly, they are told to wait their turn for revolution.

These words — these weapons of patriarchy — and the physical abuse that is their frequent counterpart, have debilitated social movements for decades.

I think back to another movement with a patriarchy problem — the local chapter of Students for a Democratic Society I joined as an undergraduate. While we mocked the old sexist slogan from the Vietnam War era — "Girls say yes to boys who say no" — implicitly congratulating ourselves on how far we had come, the group lacked a framework for examining gender dynamics. We were hindered by white male dominance; women felt their opinions were not valued. When we formed a women's caucus, we discovered that one of the group's most dominant and charismatic men had abused or sexually coerced several women in the group. Lacking another model to address his behavior — and prioritizing our own emotional safety — we asked him to leave.

One in three women in the United States in both queer and straight relationships reports domestic abuse in her lifetime (27). Activists are no different. Patriarchy and violence surface regularly among activists on the Left — even, and perhaps especially, among those who fancy themselves liberated from all oppressive tendencies. Abusive behavior among activists traumatizes individual survivors and, if left unchecked, can poison social movements. Those abused by fellow activists may find themselves with nowhere to turn if the community fails them by siding with their abuser. Now, there is a book that connects abuse within our communities to the larger struggle for liberation.

*The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*, edited by Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, is a brave, beautiful and deeply necessary book. The editors build on the principles of the prison abolition movement and the work of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, connecting the struggle against gender violence to the struggle against capitalism and white supremacy. As INCITE! cofounder Andrea Smith writes in her preface to the book, "movements must dispense with the idea that we can worry about gender violence 'after the revolution,' because gender violence is a primary strategy for white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism" (xv). By dismantling heteropatriarchy, Smith argues, we also attack the underlying idea that domination on the basis of gender, class, or race is natural or acceptable (xv).

The editors envision their book as "a community builder, an educational resource, a toolkit, a prayer, and documentation of a collective effort to document where we are with this work" (xxxiv). It is also a call to action for activists who have not addressed patterns of abuse within their communities. Some activists will recognize familiar patterns, such as the abusive man who is also a

"big activist" — you know, the dude who occupies extra space at meetings and uses his intellectual power and enlightened rhetoric to trap activist women in a cycle of power and control (25-26). As many of us have learned through personal experience, some activists on the Left possess a keen ability to "talk the talk" without "walking the walk." Among activists, patriarchal behavior — which ranges from dominance during meetings to sexual assault — is often greeted by silence. Targets of abuse may silently disappear. In their essay, "Ending Oppression. Building Solidarity. Creating Community Solutions," authors Meiver De la Cruz and Carol Gomez of the group MataHari: Eye of the Day demand that we notice these disappearances: "It's time we acknowledge the absence of voices, resulting from abuse, as significant political losses. These absences matter; our movements suffer as we do" (26). As this book shows, some groups have found a way to address abuse without forcing either the abuser or the survivor to leave the community.

Some groups opposed to the prison industrial complex have attempted to confront gender-based violence through community-based responses, applying the concepts of "restorative justice," "transformative justice," or "community accountability." Thankfully, *The Revolution Starts at Home* is not an unapologetic defense of the community accountability model, nor do the authors seek to steer all survivors away from the criminal legal system and toward community-based solutions. They avoid the trap in which "'Not calling the cops' becomes a litmus test for radical realness," as activist Connie Burk describes it in her essay, "Think. Re-think.: Accountable Communities" (269).

The authors are generally frank about their own experiences of abuse, and equally frank about the difficulty of executing an effective community response. Rather than demeaning survivors with unequivocal rejections and ideology, the editors honor the complexity of abuse by using storytelling as the book's framework. Stories of survival from sex workers, LGBT people, disabled people, immigrants, and people of color are this book's backbone and its guts. LGBT people and those whose stories are most likely to be ignored or erased by the mainstream domestic violence movement become the central voices in this book. These stories are the best hope we have for learning, healing, and eventually ending abuse. In a powerful essay called "Seeking Asylum: On Intimate Partner Violence and Disability," author Peggy Munson describes how disability isolated her from family and friends, leaving her dependent on abusers. Her approach reflects the complexity and honesty of many of the book's essays:

Abusive partners have been the same people who often saved my life and gave me caregiving for much of the last ten years, while simultaneously brutalizing me. I found myself, by my late twenties, trapped in a city where I knew almost no one, so sick I could barely leave my bed, unable to move back home due to the severity of my illness, trying to negotiate with ableist strangers over the internet and phone to get love, care, help, anything. The reality was nobody, including my family, wanted the responsibility of taking care of someone with my extreme combination of limiting disabilities....I was beaten long before I ever met a batterer. (117)

Imagining accountable communities, then, also means providing care for the disabled, and meeting all survivors where they are. Support is not merely an ideological construct, but a tangible goal that involves time, energy and a commitment to what Munson calls, "the radical notion of doing what is needed" (133).

By now, the lack of adequate support for survivors is well-known among radical feminists and activists on the Left. Mainstream domestic violence agencies rely heavily on the criminal legal system and law enforcement, alienating survivors who do not wish to see their undocumented abusers deported, or who have learned to expect violence and abuse from police. Within domestic

violence shelters, survivors may find their lives tightly controlled in a hierarchical system that, in its own bizarre way, can replicate the cycle of power and control imposed by the abuser. Men and LGBT people, or parents with older male offspring, may have trouble finding shelter at all. Yet while activists on the Left may reject the criminal legal system in broad terms, few can offer a meaningful and specific idea of what a community solution looks like. It is one thing to reject the current system — rife as it is with racism and brutality — and quite another to imagine a world where survivors can find safety and heal, while abusers are held accountable.

Andrea Smith addresses one of the biggest challenges of the community accountability model in her preface, noting that "developing community-based responses to violence cannot rely on a romanticized notion of 'community' that is not sexist, homophobic, or otherwise problematic. We cannot assume that there is even an intact community to begin with. Our political task then becomes to *create* communities of accountability" (xvi). The book answers this call by offering stories and helpful, concrete suggestions from groups that have attempted to create strong communities. In an interview with Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Alexis Pauline Gumbs of the UBUNTU coalition describes the group's highly involved and detailed support of an UBUNTU member ("June") whose abusive husband and father of her children, a member of the local police force, began threatening her:

[T]he conversation started with her needs and priorities and vision for the situation. Her priorities were that she and her kids be safe, and that her kids know that they were loved by everyone (including their father, who was being violent).

From there we brainstormed possible plans of actions, including information to be obtained (for instance, the name and contact details for an important person respected by her husband who could talk to him and hopefully bring him back from the violent place he had gotten to, and the process for and consequences of obtaining a restraining order so that she could decide if she wanted or needed one). Then we assessed what resources we could assemble, including: a place for her to stay that her husband did not know about and to which he had never been; people to accompany her to meetings with him on arranging logistics regarding the kids and the separation; folks to attend the kids' dance recital that the husband would also be at; people to hang out with the kids while they did their homework etc. so that she could have difficult phone conversations with her husband that she did not want them to overhear; people to stay at the house with her and the kids so that she would not have to be there alone with the threat of her husband possibly showing up. (83-84)

Here we see an activist group responding to a single case of domestic abuse as robustly and strategically as our own activist groups might respond to any other political issue — with long meetings, strategy sessions, and the offering of their homes, energy, and patience. Importantly, the response begins with a discussion about what the survivor needs, and the group does not automatically eliminate the possibility of engaging the criminal legal system through a restraining order. To accomplish this level of support, Gumbs argues that groups need little more than a commitment to support each other: "Too often simple but crucial resources, like people to talk to, and space and time to deal with something hard and/or scary, are not available to most people. But when we decide to support each other, we have what we need" (85).

The use of community accountability in domestic abuse cases is controversial. It hinges on the assumption that the abuser can change, and that the community can offer a more promising option than prison. Sometimes, that community is not available. In the essay "A Sliding Stance," the author

N. recounts the failure of both the courts and the community. After describing the harmful gendered assumptions made about the relationship by the court officer and judge, N. writes, "The truth was, though, in their own way, my queer feminist activist communities didn't know any more what to do with me or us than the courts did" (163-164). N. goes on to justify the decision to go to court: "I didn't love the option of engaging the court system, it being an institution embedded in racism, classism, patriarchy....Unfortunately there didn't appear to be a lot of other options available. I didn't trust my lover to hold herself accountable, and who else would be there to deal with whatever came next? However conflicted my decision, in the absence of community alternatives it offered me some promise of response, some authority where I felt like I had none" (164). Given the relatively new and experimental nature of many community accountability efforts, the inclusion of stories from activists who chose to engage the criminal legal system seems a realistic and helpful approach. Stories like N.'s also indict communities that fight for gender inequality, but fail to provide necessary support to individual members.

Just as the support process for survivors relies on a sensitive community, the accountability process for abusers, in most instances described in the book, relies heavily on the presence of people whom the abuser respects and to whom he or she will listen.

In their essay, "Beautiful, Difficult, Powerful: Ending Sexual Assault Through Transformative Justice," The Chrysalis Collective, a group formed in response to the acquaintance rape of a community member ("Diane") by another local activist ("Tom"), describes an exhausting accountability process with apparently lukewarm results. Here, we see a survivor who is surrounded by sympathetic allies ("a group of womyn and trans folk of color with experience organizing around reproductive justice, queer health, racial justice, gender justice, youth issues, immigration rights, and food justice" (190)). The group approaches Diane's experience of injustice with organized fervor, forming a "Survivor Support Team" for Diane and an "Accountability Team" for Tom, the latter of which is composed of people whom the group thinks Tom will respect ("...the aggressor was a middle-class, straight, white male with a pattern of not listening. We felt that an AT led by working-class womyn of color would be less effective than a predominantly white and/or male AT (192)). The teams spend "several months mentally and emotionally preparing for the initial approach and first meeting with Tom" (196). This cumbersomeness is a drawback to the community accountability process; the amount of time and energy required may be a privilege that groups do not have, nor do all activist groups have a team of willing people to whom the abuser will listen. But given the amount of damage done by abuse in our communities, the alternative — ignoring the abuse and thus likely forcing the survivor to leave — is even less acceptable. The results in this case appear mixed: the authors write, "Our unfinished process has lasted almost two years so far and we have gone through stressful times. Yet healing and transformation is clearly, slowly, steadily happening for everyone involved" (203-204). The authors are honest about their pitfalls as well as successes, and the detailed outline of goals and lessons learned provides one of many helpful resources in this book for groups that might be embarking on accountability processes.

It was inspiring to see the commitment of the Chrysalis Collective and the other groups featured in the book to a process that, under the best of circumstances, supports the healing of a single survivor and changes the outlook of a single abuser. This is one vision for creating a world without abuse; if each survivor and each abuser is surrounded by friends and allies, with the support they need to heal and change, we may — slowly, steadily — build the framework for a better world. This and other stories in the book left me marveling at what a privilege it can be to have a community strong enough to support the profound processes of healing and accountability. The task of establishing these communities when so many survivors never even feel empowered to speak about their abuse is a daunting concept, but a beautiful one. I also wondered how this model could ever spread to survivors who are not members of activist communities, or to those who have been

isolated by abuse, or by racial, class, immigrant or sexual identity, or other circumstances, and who do not have a community to support them. The issue of child abuse is also not addressed directly by this book, although at least one essay mentions abuse involving young people. Perhaps these are topics for future books.

One of this book's many takeaway messages is about deconstructing the victim/abuser dichotomy, in part by acknowledging that those who are being abused may react abusively to their circumstances. While the mainstream domestic violence movement makes demons of abusers and heroes of survivors, embracing incarceration as the solution, contributor Shannon Perez-Darby in her essay "The Secret Joy of Accountability: Self-accountability as a Building Block for Change," shows how this outlook renders abuse in activist communities invisible: "If survivors are perfect, then people who batter are evil monsters, barely human. This binary allows us to think of batterers as people who exist somewhere else, in fantasy and stories but not in our lives, communities, and homes" (101-102). Perez-Darby asks us to look inward and take responsibility for our decisions in order to begin the process of changing our communities (107). Examining our own abusive patterns may be one of the most difficult things we do as activists. It is also one of the most important.