Protection Without Police

North American Community Responses to Violence in the 1970s and Today

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After successfully stopping an intruder from raping his sister, Antoine Dodson appeared on the local news warning the community, "obviously we have a rapist in Lincoln Park... hide your kids, hide your wife, hide your husband." Addressing the assailant, Antoine warned, "we're looking for you we gon find you." In a follow-up interview, after acknowledging that other women in the neighbourhood had been targeted and that public housing police had refused to take action, Dodson asked: "what do we need to do as people to keep our community safe?"[1] Dodson's question raises an issue with which prison abolitionists and anti-violence organizers must grapple: how do we keep our communities and ourselves safe without relying on the police? It's a question that INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence co-founder and feminist scholar Andrea Smith has also considered:

> We asked ourselves "if the state's not the solution, what else could be the solution?" We really didn't know, but we thought "let's just do activist institutes around the country and start to see what ideas might come up."

> In one workshop somebody said "this is a problem I'm dealing with right now because in my apartment complex there's a man

that's beating his wife, and I don't trust the police, I don't want to call them, but I also don't want this violence to continue." When she said this, it made me realize how this criminal justice approach had actually individualized not just survivors of violence but also people who might intervene because it never occurred to her to organize the apartment complex to do something.

So if you ask yourself the question "what can I do?" there's not much you can do other than call the police or do nothing. But if you ask yourself the question, "what can we do?" then a lot of ideas start to develop...

When we developed these ideas, we saw these as a kind of a proactive and a creative process rather than a negative process. That is, the idea was not to say, "if you are under attack you can't call the police" because if you're under attack, do what you need to do. The question isn't "should you call the police or not?" The question is "why have we given you no other options but to call the police?[2]

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the larger mainstream anti-violence movement in the US began to rely increasingly on state policing and prisons as solutions to interpersonal violence. As awareness around gender violence grew, the state responded to pressure to address the issue by pushing for more – and more extensive – intervention (such as mandatory arrests and lengthy prison sentences) and reframed abuse and violence as individual pathologies rather than symptoms of structural domination, power, and institutional patriarchy. Ignored, however, by this type of anti-violence response are the ways in which police and prisons are themselves sites and causes of institutional and state-sanctioned forms of violence.

While the carceral state consolidated and won the support of many anti-violence activists, many outside the mainstream continued to challenge the idea that increased criminalization and harsher penalties were solutions to interpersonal violence. They recognized that the prison system is premised on social control, not safety. In 1982, Gail Sullivan, a former staff member of the Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women's Service Groups, publicly acknowledged that legislation was not necessarily passed to ensure women's safety: "laws are made by those in power to protect their own interest. We need to understand that under such a system, when men are punished for their behavior, it is not because

the system is protecting women but because to do so supports and reflects an aspect of the system, such as racism and the isolation of Third World communities."[3]

It's no surprise that, like Sullivan, many activists have become advocates of developing alternatives to the state's criminal justice systems while simultaneously fighting against state efforts to co-opt the concerns of the anti-violence movement in order to expand its ability to monitor, control, and punish. The increased reliance on the state has taken power away from survivors of violence and shifted our focus away from the need to develop community responses. Even when activists take seemingly radical positions, they sometimes fail to fully or adequately address the question of how to best respond to violence. Prison abolition organizations like Critical Resistance and INCITE! have highlighted how, by and large, the anti-prison movement has yet to consider strategies for tackling the rampant forms of violence that women and LGBT people face in their everyday lives: street harassment, sexual harassment at work, rape, intimate partner abuse, and state and police violence. As both groups noted in a joint statement released in 2001, "until these strategies are developed, many women will feel short-changed by the movement. In addition, by not seeking alliances with the anti-violence movement, the anti-prison movement has sent the message that it is possible to liberate communities without seeking the well-being and safety of women." In response, both groups called for analyses and strategies that aimed to develop community-based responses while opposing legislation advocating prison expansion, the criminalization of poor communities and communities of colour, and state violence – even if this legislation incorporates measures to support survivors of interpersonal gender violence.[4]

Although the question remains far from being resolved, we can be inspired by the work of a number of groups and activists from marginalized communities who are – and have been – organizing community-based responses to violence. Some groups have responded immediately to specific acts of violence. Others have looked to build community, challenge preexisting notions of male privilege and power, and educate community members to challenge both the violence in their communities and its underlying causes. Having strategies to address (if not prevent) violence *before* it occurs is more effective than scrambling to figure out appropriate responses in the aftermath of trauma. However, knowledge of these responses has remained limited. Consequently, other communities

have been left without the benefit of knowing what succeeded and what failed in other times and places.

In what follows, I examine the community-based responses of the 1970s alongside present-day initiatives. These examples span the spectrum from retaliatory to preventative. Among North American activists and communities, there has been a general trend toward the preventative model. Nevertheless, while some of the examples from the 1970s involve confrontational actions taken against assailants and all of the contemporary examples emphasize community-building and educational initiatives, it would be an oversimplification to say that all of the 1970s models relied on confrontation while today's initiatives all rely solely on community-building. Some current instances of activist community responses to violence – particularly to sexual assault – have involved physical violence. However, the contemporary responses I highlight here attempt to centre the needs of those most vulnerable to, or those who have survived, harm. While many of these strategies also attempt to hold the perpetrator accountable, the focus is on the needs of the survivor and community rather than on retaliation or punishment.

Taking Safety Into Their Own Hands

During the 1970s, women's liberation groups recognized the need to take safety into their own hands. By forming street patrols and self-defense groups, they worked collectively to defend women from violence. In cities across North America, women formed vigilante-type groups to publicize – and sometimes punish – men who assaulted women. Their actions were often immediate and to the point. In 1973, a group of women in Los Angeles formed an "anti-rape squad" and vowed to shave the heads of rapists, cover them with dye, and put up posters featuring the man's picture and text that read "this man rapes women." While it remains unclear whether the squad actually followed through on its threats, it did – in at least one instance – publicly identify a sexual assailant. When two members of the squad realized that they had been raped by the same man, they picketed outside his wedding with placards that read "two women in this group were raped by the bridegroom."[5] That same year, after a woman complained that a neighbour followed her whenever she went out, squad members followed the man for three days. Their actions persuaded him to stop.[6]

These actions are among the most well-known examples of the anti-violence models used during the 1970s. Primarily reactive, these activists' tactics responded to acts of violence that had already taken place. However, it's important to note that responses to violence during that decade ran the spectrum from retributive to preventative. In contrast to the more well-known and headline-grabbing confrontations described above, the women's liberation group Cell 16 took a preemptive approach by patrolling the streets after dark and escorting female factory workers to their cars or to public transportation.

Other communities also took measures to ensure women's safety. In 1979, following police indifference to the brutal rapes and murders of several Black women in Boston, residents organized the Dorchester Green Light Program. The program provided identifiable safe houses for women who were threatened or assaulted on the streets. Program coordinators, who lived in Dorchester, visited and spoke to community groups and gatherings in their areas. Residents interested in opening their homes as safe houses filled out applications, which included references and descriptions of the house living situation. The program screened each application and checked references. Once accepted, the resident attended orientation sessions, which included self-defence instruction. They were then given a green light bulb for their porch; when someone was at home, the green light was turned on as a signal to anyone in trouble. Within eight months, over 100 safe houses were established.[7]

Making safety the responsibility of the entire neighbourhood is a concept that's still put into practice today, especially in low-income communities of colour. In the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood in Brooklyn, lesbian, gay, Two Spirit, trans, and gender non-conforming people of colour formed the Safe OUTside the System Collective to address violence using community-based strategies rather than the police. In 2007, the collective launched the Safe Neighborhood Campaign. Similar to the Dorchester Green Light Program of the 1970s, the campaign provides safe havens from sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and racist language, behaviour, and violence of all sorts. The campaign has three phases. In the first, neighbourhood public spaces such as restaurants, schools, churches, and businesses agree to visibly identify themselves as safe havens for those threatened with or fleeing from violence. In the second phase, the campaign incorporates an educational component to address some of the causes of anti-gay and anti-trans

violence. Members of the campaign train the owners and employees of the designated Safe Spaces, along with other community members on homophobia, transphobia, and ways to prevent violence without relying on law enforcement.[8] In the third phase, Safe Space advocates recruit other community members and public figures into the campaign. In this way, they work to spread the idea that safety is a community responsibility and educate the larger community about some of the causes underlying homophobic and transphobic violence.[9]

In 2010, after a rash of muggings and robberies in the same neighbourhood, Black male residents began escorting people home from the subway station. The idea began one night after several men shared stories of friends who had recently been mugged. "I decided we can't have these people terrorizing our young women and children, and we're not speaking up and making our presence felt," stated Richard Beavers, a 41-year-old who joined after a friend had been robbed on her own block. In addition to escorting subway riders home, the group – called We Make Us Better – sponsored a neighbourhood outreach walk during which they stopped to talk to young men hanging out on corners. "We're about encouraging males to be involved because you don't see men in their twenties, thirties and forties involved in the community anymore," stated co-founder Kareem Verlack. "We're trying to bridge that gap."[10]

Both the Safe Neighborhood Campaign and We Make Us Better demonstrate that the idea (and practice) of making safety the responsibility of the entire community persisted beyond the 1970s. Instead of holding forums about violence with local police, both groups organized their own initiatives. They also reached out to others in their community to educate them about the forms and causes of violence and to involve them in finding solutions.

Addressing Violence at Home

The efforts recounted above are community strategies aimed at addressing external threats of violence. As Safe OUTside the System and We Make Us Better demonstrate, today's organizing often addresses immediate threats like assaults on the street and creates dialogue among community members to challenge and change some of the conditions leading to violence. However, today's organizers have also recognized that developing community response strategies should also actively involve developing a sense of community. As in the 1970s, community today is at times defined

geographically. At other times, it is defined more by identity or shared values.

In 2006, women of colour, queers, and survivors of sexual assault in Durham, North Carolina, formed UBUNTU, a coalition that uses community-building to combat violence. "A lot of times we talk about community as if it already exists, but I don't actually think that we have an autonomous, completely sustained community," notes co-founder Alexis Pauline Gumbs. "We live with all sorts of dependence on the state and outside institutions. We have a lot of work to do to have the type of communication and support that would fulfill all of our needs."[11]

Gumbs recalled that UBUNTU members asked themselves and each other, "what kind of community do we need to create to have a world free of gender violence? What would that world be full of? Not just an empty world with no sexual violence." With these questions informing their work, UBUNTU members set about creating a "complicated community of people ready to be there for each other in times of need... and to celebrate each other." UBUNTU's community-building efforts include informal support mechanisms through which community members offer child-care, trade massages, do aromatherapy work, share personal fitness training, cook, and grow food together. "In that way, everything that we do to create community ... helps to clarify why and how deeply we are ready to be there for each other in times of violence and celebration."

These community-building efforts have enabled members to respond to incidents of partner violence without having to rely on the police. Gumbs recounted one instance in which an UBUNTU member encountered a woman who had been beaten by her former partner.

This UBUNTU member called the rest of us to see who was home and available in the direct neighborhood, took the young woman into her home and contacted the spiritual leader of the woman who had experienced the violence along with other women that the young woman trusted from her spiritual community, who also came to the home, and made sure that she was able to receive medical care. She also arranged for members of our UBUNTU family to have a tea session with the young woman to talk about healing and options, to share our experiences, to embrace the young woman and to let her know that she wasn't alone in her healing process.

Gumbs reflected:

> These responses were invented on the spot... without a pre-existing model or a logistical agreement. But they were also made possible by a larger agreement that we as a collective of people living all over the city are committed to responding to gendered violence. This comes out of the political education and collective healing work that we have done, and the building of relationships that strongly send the message... you can call me if you need something, or if you don't. You can call me to be there for you... or someone that you need help being there for. I think it is very important that we have been able to see each other as resources so that when we are faced with violent situations we don't think our only option is to call the state.[12]

In 1999, FAR Out (Friends Are Reaching Out) was founded by queer communities of colour in the Pacific Northwest using a similar framework. Working with queer-identified survivors, their closest friends, and family members, FAR Out works to prevent and address partner abuse by facilitating discussions and working to keep people connected. In abusive relationships, the abuser distorts their partner's perceptions of reality and self-worth. No matter what the reality actually is, the abuser twists it to demonstrate how worthless the other person is. If the abuser acknowledges that harm has occurred (and many times abusers do not), they twist the course of events to blame the partner for provoking it. Over time, with no other mirror to reflect reality, the abused partner begins to believe these lies and grows convinced that they deserve the abuse. Because this tactic often goes unrecognized by the abused person's friends and potential supporters, it contributes to their sense of isolation from the larger community.

Recognizing that isolation is a crucial but underestimated element of abuse, FAR Out encourages friends and family members to keep in touch and to develop processes to openly talk about their relationships. Continuing friendships allows abuse survivors to understand that they are not alone. Having friends commit to staying in contact with an abuse survivor enables them to challenge and counter the distortions brought on by isolation. Because FAR Out relies on preexisting friendships rather than on impersonal social service agencies or the police, it strengthens the capacity of the community to handle abuse.

When compared to the lengthy process of developing community, the 1970s-era women's liberation group tactics of physical retaliation, intimidation, and public shaming seem much speedier and more efficient. However, while these actions may have had more immediate results, it's not clear that they altered the aggressor's thinking and behaviour. Like imprisonment, punishment models do not address the root causes of violence or foreground the needs of survivors. While it is true that punishment models may provide some sense of justice or closure for those harmed, they may also prompt fears of retribution. Ultimately, they fail to challenge hegemonic ideas about power or encourage aggressors to seriously consider the impact of their actions.

Men's Role in Ending Violence

Ending violence requires the dismantling of dominant ideas around power, consent and gender which is why some contemporary groups have taken on the challenge of engaging boys and men to consider how they can work toward a world free from violence. The DC-based organization Men Can Stop Rape (MCSR) uses their Men of Strength (MOST) clubs to mobilize men in high schools and colleges to speak and act out against sexual violence. "One of the goals of the MOST clubs is to give men space to make mistakes, but at the same time encourage them to hold themselves and each other accountable for their mistakes," MCSR member Joe Vess recounts. "The first thing we do is hold a MOST club social, where we bring in boxes of pizza and show movies to get the conversation started... We don't want to overwhelm them, so the week after that, the guys have space to talk about what's going on in their lives, family, girlfriends, successes at school or in athletics." From there, club members organize community service programs (where they commit to tasks like doing maintenance work at a domestic violence shelter) and encourage each other to be proactive allies to the women and girls around them.

In New York City, men involved in organizing around gender violence and child sexual abuse realized that the groups developing community-based responses to harm were composed predominantly of cisgender (those who identify with the gender that they were assigned at birth) women, transgender, and gender non-conforming activists. "We felt that we needed more cisgender men engaged in this work and that we would all need to do some advanced work specifically around male privilege and violence in

order to enter future organizing work with more shared analysis, capacity and commitment," noted the three men who began the Challenging Male Supremacy project. Partnering with groups like Safe OUTside the System and Sisterfire NYC (a collective affiliated with INCITE!), the project facilitated a Study-into-Action group that – between May 2009 and January 2010 – discussed, read, and reflected on male supremacy in their personal and political lives.

During these discussions, the group struggled to "replace the norm of cis men who are unable to notice their own or others' emotions and emotional triggers, with one where they reciprocate the support they get and provide support for others in ways that challenge patriarchal social relations." The group also worked to develop a "profound grasp and consistent practice of consent and moving from a legalistic framework of soliciting permission to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of power." As a result, group members have "tried to reframe consent – and particularly the word 'no' – as something that can make healthier relations possible for all parties, and allow us to maintain connection in the future."[13]

Working with boys and men so that they can reexamine and reshape their ideas about the world takes time. After all, as Vess from MCSR points out, "when we meet a young guy in high school, he's gone through fourteen to seventeen years of conditioning from popular culture and society about what a man is supposed to be, and expecting men to [immediately] understand more complicated and esoteric aspects of sexism is unrealistic."[14] Because the results are not as visible as picketing a rapist's wedding, stalking a stalker, or even placing a green light bulb on a front porch, this work is often not recognized as anti-violence organizing. However, challenging prevailing ideas about privilege and power and connecting them to other oppressions is a vital step in shaping a world free of violence and harm.

No Cookie Cutter Formula

These examples cannot be taken as blueprints. In each of the initiatives described above, groups and communities tailored their responses to fit specific circumstances. For example, while UBUNTU drew inspiration from the Zapatista model of justice and from the Gulabi Gang in India, Gumbs notes how UBUNTU members worked to "understand their work in those contexts while also understanding that our conditions are really specific."[15]

Recognizing that strategies and tactics that succeed in small villages may not work in larger cities, UBUNTU developed strategies involving community-building to break through the isolation imposed by modern urban life. As a result, UBUNTU members are "present in people's everyday lives so that, when they're in crisis, they know who they can go to."[16] Not only do these relationships have the potential to address immediate threats and instances of violence, they can also be expanded to benefit other projects and struggles. Moreover, strategies that don't rely on physical confrontation are less likely to result in arrest or other forms of state intervention.

But state intervention is not the only danger associated with communities responding to violence themselves – particularly when a community self-defines in exclusive terms. In 2005, after a rash of burglaries in Baltimore's Orthodox Jewish community, several men began patrolling the streets in the early morning hours. These efforts grew into Shomrim (Hebrew for "watchers"), a Jewish citizen patrol group that has led search efforts for missing people, thwarted bicycle thefts, and intervened in suicide attempts. However, in November 2010, three members of Shomrim surrounded and attacked an African-American teenager, telling him, "you don't belong here!" In the preceding months, there had been a number of attacks on Jewish residents – including the pelting of a rabbi with stones, anti-Semitic graffiti on vehicles, and an attack on a young Orthodox boy. However, the fifteen-year-old attacked by Shomrim had not been involved in these attacks; he simply happened to be African-American in a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood.[17]

Other concerns around community-based accountability have arisen. For example, what happens if activist attention wrongly falls on an individual? What if a perpetrator refuses to be held account-able or refuses to participate in an accountability process while paying lip service to the concept of community accountability? What if a person uses a community accountability process to further ostracize or control another person? There are no simple answers and, unfortunately, many activists will be familiar with these scenarios. But while these situations are difficult, they should not dissuade activists from trying to develop community responses that are less reliant on the police. As the state has moved to criminalize more behaviours, vigilante tactics like those used by 1970s feminists are now more likely to result in arrests – not of the perpetrator but of those seeking retribution. However, understanding that perpetrators of violence – and perhaps especially those in activist

movements – often take advantage of their victims' unwillingness or inability to call the police, I don't recommend that such tactics be stricken entirely from the list of options available to survivors of abuse and assault. While physical retaliation does not address questions of why the original violence occurred, it may be the only means for the survivor to gain some sense of closure, particularly if the assailant has refused to take responsibility and work toward making amends for their actions.

That said, having tools and strategies to address – if not prevent – violence before it occurs is more effective than figuring out appropriate responses in the aftermath of trauma. In 2008, recognizing that partner abuse remains invisible in activist circles, social justice organizers and abuse survivors Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepnza-Samarasinha compiled the 111-page zine *The Revolution Starts at Home*.[18] "I had been inspired by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and most specifically, their Community Accountability Principles and their internal document on partner abuse within activist communities of color," writes Piepnza-Samarasinha in the zine's introduction. "But I wondered: how had the three hundred brainstormed ideas in the document worked in practice?"[19] The collection enables activists and organizers to envision community-based responses to violence and learn about the strategies and processes developed by others.

Even those who are not directly working to address questions of violence can benefit from community response strategies. Sadly, many people within movements, projects, and communities have experienced (or will experience) violence. At least one in four women and one in nine men in the US experience domestic violence at some point in their lives.[20] This figure does not include violence by non-intimate partners. The community-building necessary for community-based response strategies requires developing networks and support systems that can also be used to fulfill other needs. As a result, they enable us to decrease our reliance on the state. Struggles to transform society require that we challenge people's acceptance of oppressive institutions and demonstrate the desirability of alternative approaches. Developing alternatives to state institutions like the police and prison system undermines the state's claim that it's necessary for safety. At their best, community response models will encourage people to develop alternatives to all kinds of state-sponsored solutions. Talking about UBUNTU's work in the larger non-activist community, Gumbs observes that "people's ideas of police [and] engagement in preexisting

institutions" often change when they realize "how it is is not the way it has to be." ★

Notes

1   Dr. Goddess, "Our Fascination With the Antoine Dodson Situation," *Revelations: From the Mind of Dr. Goddess because she is a/muse/d* (blog), August 13, 2010, http://drgoddess.blogspot.com/2010/08/our-fascination-with-antoine-dodson.html

2   Andrea Smith, "Captured by the State: The Antiviolence Movement and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," Researchers and Academics of Colour for Equality (RACE) conference, Concordia University, Montreal. June 6, 2009.

3   Gail Sullivan, "Funny Things Happen on our Way to Revolution," *Aegis*, Spring 1982, 14.

4   Critical Resistance and INCITE!, "Critical Resistance-Incite! Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex," 2001, http://www.incite-national.org/index.php?s=92

5   "The Rape Wave," *Newsweek*, January 29, 1973, 59.

6   "The Sexes: Women Against Rape," *Time Magazine*, April 23, 1973, 104.

7   Tacie Dejanikus and Janis Kelly, "Roxbury Organizing," *off our backs* 9, no. 9, October 1979, 7.

8   Safe Neighborhood Campaign, http://alp.org/safe-neighborhood-campaign

9   Safe *OUT*side the System Collective brochure, http://www.incite-national.org/media/docs/5087_SOSBrochure.pdf

10 Jake Pearson, "Group of Bed-Stuy Men, We Make Us Better, Escorts Pedestrians in Wake of Robberies," *New York Daily News*, November 30, 2010, http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/brooklyn/2010/11/30/2010-11-30_taking_a_stand_on_streets_20_men_in_bedstuy_escort_pedestrians_reach_out_to_yout.html

11 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, telephone interview with author, December, 9, 2009.

12 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "An Interview with Alexis Pauline Gumbs of UBUNTU," in *The Revolution Starts at Home*, ed. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Ching-In Chen, and Jai Dulani. Oakland, 80-81.

13 RJ Maccani, Gaurav Jashnani and Alan Grieg, "Experiments in Transformative Justice: The Challenging Male Supremacy Project in New York City," http://zapagringo.blogspot.com/2010/06/challenging-male-supremacy-project.html

14 Keidra Chaney, "Men Can Stop Rape...But How?" *make/shift* 3, Spring/Summer 2008.

15 The Zapatistas use *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (Good Government Councils) to investigate and resolve conflicts within their territories. The focus is on resolution and reparations rather than punishment. The Gulabi Gang is a group of several hundred women in the Banda area, one of the poorest regions in India's northern Uttar Pradesh state. Because sexual and domestic violence remain common (as does police indifference, despite the 2005 Protection for Women from Domestic Violence Act), the Gulabi Gang physically punishes abusive husbands by beating them with sticks.

16   Gumbs interview.

17   Justin Fenton, "Member of Jewish patrol group accused of striking teen in city," *Baltimore Sun*, December 02, 2010, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-12-02/news/bs-md-ci-shomrim-member-arrest-20101201_1_nathan-willner-shomrim-patrol-group

18   The zine, which is available online at http://www.incite-national.org/media/docs/0985_revolution-starts-at-home.pdf is scheduled for release as a book by South End Press in May 2011.

19   Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Where the Revolution Started: An Introduction," in *The Revolution Starts at Home*, 6-7.

20   "CDC Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey," 2005. Quoted Vanessa in the National Domestic Violence Hotline, "Abuse in America," http://www.thehotline.org/get-educated/abuse-in-america/