

# Creating a Community Against Abuse

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2012

A review of *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*, Edited by Ching-In Chen, Jai DuLani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Preface by Andrea Smith. South End Press, 2011, 325 pp, \$16

*The Revolution Starts at Home* is a series of articles, accounts, and discussions aimed at not only dealing with the aftermath of abuse, but also challenging the underlying institutions and values that perpetuate abuse and violence. The aim of the anti-violence movement, as Rebecca Farr of Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA) writes, is to “create a world where so many people are walking around with the skills and knowledge to support one another that there is no longer the need for anonymous hotlines.”

This book is a collective effort, the interviews, poems, accounts, and analyses all written, recorded, and edited by people who are directly affected by the overwhelming violence and abuse visited upon themselves, friends, neighbors, and entire communities. They are all working, as part of collectives, larger movements, and as individuals to end violence through developing ways of listening and evolving a myriad of approaches to the many complex issues this work entails.

Some central concepts to dealing with these issues are community accountability and transformative or restorative justice. According to the editors, community accountability is “any strategy to address violence, abuse or harm that creates safety, justice, reparations, and healing without relying on...state systems.”

Transformative justice is “an approach to respond to and prevent...violence that puts transformation and liberation at the heart of the change...[and]...seeks to integrate both personal and social transformation.”

Restorative justice is “[a framework in which] those who have been harmed take an active role in addressing that harm...and those who have caused harm are expected to take responsibility for their actions, to repair the harm they’ve done.” Understanding, applying, critiquing, and evolving these concepts is also part of the important work being done by contributors to this anthology.

As much as being anarchists or radicals can mean taking responsibility for ourselves and those around us, there are times when we are faced with our inability to cope with situations of crisis. The personal is political, we proclaim smugly, then proceed to concentrate all our energies on our collective social struggles, leaving the personal to the individual. As contributor Jessica Yee puts it:

only certain types of activism [are] valued, while so many [other] forms...(especially at home) are underappreciated and overlooked...let’s understand that some people’s resistance is just the act of surviving...

This brings us to the problem of community within the activist movement. Is it honest to suggest that we are really part of activist communities? While writing this review, a friend challenged me on my use of the word. I use it despite its abstract and problematic nature partly because I think that there are communities within our movements, self-defined and amorphous though they maybe, and also because it is a word used throughout *The Revolution Starts at Home* to describe anything from a small group of friends and family members to an international movement whose members share certain affinities and concerns.

Collective or community action, as outlined by the Oakland, CA based Story Telling & Organizing Project (STOP), is certainly important to confronting and processing abuse:

The intervention experiences described...could not have happened through individual action alone. Each instance required some level of collective responsibility and accountability. They also [proceeded] from the foundational assumption that the collective (the family, an organization, a neighborhood) impacts and is impacted by both the harm done and the responses to harm.

STOP partners with other groups around the world to collect and share stories and testimonies through their website, an important step to building a “toolbox of shared resources” for people trying to create new kinds of families and communities free of violence.

Members of the Durham, NC coalition UBUNTU trying to help a woman ease her way out of an abusive marriage, for example, I describe a process quite similar to direct action planning: taking the time to think of all possible outcomes and scenarios, making sure everyone will be safe, supporting each other emotionally but also practically (childcare, meals) until the moment of action, so that when it comes you are ready and united. The process not only helps end the individual cycle of abuse but also helps build strong bonds and encourages creative and critical thinking about strategies and risks.

Putting emphasis on collective action doesn't minimize the courage and strength of individuals who undertake this kind of work or come forward with their stories. It is simply meant to encourage the collectivity to take action with victims and try to address not only single instances of violence and abuse, but also the underlying issues that perpetuate abusive and violent behavior (patriarchy, male privilege, racism, sexism, homo- and trans-phobia, ableism, etc.).

This book is a continuation of a zine project subtitled, “Confronting Partner Abuse in Activist Communities.” The book's subtitle reads, “Confronting Intimate Violence within Activist Communities.” This difference in wording reflects the realization that violence and abuse can take many forms, from partner abuse to violence against sex workers to betrayals of trust and crossing of boundaries by people who exert significant influence or authority over others within activist circles.

The different forms the sections of this book take add to our understanding of the diversity of experiences of abuse, with gut wrenching poems like editor Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's, “When Your Parents Made You;” intriguing and inspiring roundtable discussions like the one recorded in the section “It Takes Ass to Whip Ass, Understanding & Confronting Violence Against Sex Workers;” and amazingly brave personal accounts of violence, rape, and abuse by too many of the contributors to name.

Many questions arise around these issues. For example, is a “survivor/perpetrator” dichotomy helpful or harmful? When people being abused fight back or lash out at their abusers, how does this complicate the ensuing accountability process, and should it? Are feminist analyses of intimate violence bourgeois, divisive, and problematic, or do they simply challenge underlying systems of oppression that transcend cultural and class identities?

Linking oppressions is intrinsic to the work being done in the anti-violence movement. Sex workers, queer and transgender people, people of color, and migrants often face a dilemma when considering using the legal system to escape abusive situations. They may earn a living or live on the margins of legality already or simply be part of communities where state authorities regularly repress and oppress them, their families, and their loved ones.

For people with disabilities there are still more considerations. Their partners may be their main support people who they rely on physically. As Peggy Munson points out in her contribution to the book, *Seeking Asylum*, it can be difficult for a person who is in a situation of dependence to denounce the one person they must rely on without some assurance they will be supported both in their day to day and through along and arduous accountability process.

Queer communities must face gender binary analyses of sexism and gendered perpetrator/victim roles that don't necessarily apply to their relationships. As one person recounts of their experience getting a peace bond against an ex-lover:

...the judge [called] my lover 'mister,' [gave] her masculine pronouns despite her obviously female name...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.

*The Revolution Starts at Home* is certainly not a perfect resource. In fact, it is far from a field manual, due in part to the diversity of experiences and approaches of its contributors, and this may prove frustrating to those reaching for a radical "how-to" book in times of crisis. In short: there are no easy answers.

Besides the support work and healing and exhausting confrontation, the people taking on this struggle are working very hard to address all of the various theoretical and practical problems that arise from trying to build a common analyses and responses to intimate violence.

Like any grassroots movement, it is ever changing, evolving, backpedaling, and redefining itself. It will be interesting to see what inspiring stories will be contained within the pages of the next *Revolution Starts at Home*, what new lessons will have been learned and put to use.

It will also be interesting to see how, or whether, this book has an impact on activist and radical communities at large, challenging us all to rethink the way we treat one another both at home and in the streets.

Marieke Bivar is a student and a worker. She believes in tearing down all governments, borders, and fences, real and abstract, to create a world where people can live on their own terms.

#### SIDEBAR

Healing from our personal experiences is not just a matter of personal health; healing is also a matter of social change. Our communities have suffered lifetimes of abuse: genocide, slavery, colonialism, massive incarceration and deportation, and police violence...The work required to undo the myriad of internalized and externalized forms of oppression is not just about what we do out in the streets, in nonprofits, or in community groups. It's also about how prepared we are to deal with the fallout from our personal experiences with violence. It's about how we treat ourselves and one another in the process. It is hard work to do this. It is really hard. But it is also necessary.

– Ana Maurine Lara, from her essay, "There is Another Way," in *The Revolution Starts at Home*

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