

# A STAND UP START-UP

confronting sexual assault  
with transformative justice



PHILLY  
STANDS  
UP

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<sup>1</sup> Bierria, Alisa; Orion Carrillo; Eboni Colbert; Xandra Ibarra; Theryn Kigvarnasud\*Vashti; Shale Maulana. "Taking Risks: Implementing Grassroots Community Accountability Strategies." *Color of Violence: the Incite! Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 2006. 251-66.

## STARTING A GROUP? START HERE!

The process of starting a group to confront sexual assault can feel a bit daunting. There's a lot to cover, a lot to think about, and where to begin isn't always clear. Here is a list of critical questions to ask yourself. Take some time to think about and deeply answer these questions -- keep track of your ideas and conclusions and use them to help you build the different facets of your group. If your answer to some of these questions is, "i have NO idea," that's ok; sometimes knowing that you don't know can be just as constructive; maybe ask for help from other groups or trainers who have some skills and knowledge in the areas you feel stumped by. May you have happy plotting and strategic planning!

-questions to ask:

- why does the group need to form?
- what are the group's objectives for confronting sexual assault (workshopping, zine publication, conflict intervention...)?
- what are the short, intermediate and long term goals for the group, in terms of group evolution?
- what is the structure of your group?
  - open or closed group?
  - how often do you meet?
  - how do you communicate?
  - how do you make decisions?
  - do certain individuals have specific roles?
  - do you require monetary or physical resources to do your work? how you gonna get bank?
- if you're working with survivors, how are you connected to perpetrator accountability? if you're working with perpetrators, how do you stay accountable to survivors and survivor support groups?
- who is in your group? who does your group serve?
- how do you do self education (learning the skills to be effective)?
  - what models for justice are you using in your work (restorative justice, transformative justice, specific conflict mediation)
- how do you cultivate an anti-oppression analysis? how do you make this analysis foundational to your work?
- how do you ensure accountability (internally, to your community, and to the movement to end sexual assault)
- what's your relationship to other groups working to confront sexual assault? If you are modeling your group directly from another, already existing group, how do you ensure that your group is unique and specific to your community, your skills, and your capacity?
- what's your plan for taking care of yourselves and each other?

-nuts and bolts

- find a meeting place. it should be confidential, comfortable, and accessible
- establish a meeting time that works for everyone.
- start a listserv. gmail allows you to share documents and do collective writing and editing.
- how are you going to keep notes and document the evolution of the group?

## PHILLY STANDS UP Points of Unity

- We are a group dedicated to dealing with sexual assault.
- Philly Stands Up formed in reaction to specific incidents of sexual assault in our community and will continue to exist as an avenue of support for the future as well as working on proactive means to deal with sexual assault.
- We strive to take an active role in our communities and to deal with the deeper rooted causes of sexual assault by challenging sexist attitudes and deconstructing patriarchy in our daily lives. In this, we also recognize the interrelatedness of systems of oppression and work to confront them on all fronts.
- We work to educate ourselves and others on issues in our society that contribute to sexual assault. As well as provide information to the public that will help confront these issues and provide access to resources that exist.
- We acknowledge that socialization in a patriarchal society greatly affects how we view and deal with sexual assault. In this, we recognize that gender does not define a person and we welcome anyone who agrees to these points of unity into this group.
- We are a group that survivors can come to for help and support. We will always support survivors and ensure survivor autonomy, where they will always be in control of how a situation is dealt with.
- We work with perpetrators to recognize, understand, and change behavior, not to simply punish them or run them out of town. Dealing with an assaulter includes the long term goal of ensuring that they are not a threat to others, recognize what they have done, and work to permanently change their behavior.
- We do not support the prison system as a viable means of rehabilitation for perpetrators, but we will always support a survivor's wishes and engage the legal system on any level necessary.
- We are dedicated to this issue and this group. We all promise to ensure that our level of commitment is clear and consistent. This includes a time commitment and accountability to tasks that we agree to take on.
- There is no hierarchy within this group. We make decisions as a group with casual consensus, but will call on using formal consensus for making serious decisions.
- We value communication and honesty in our interactions. We practice active listening and do not attack one another, but rather work through conflicting views. We

are not interested in “PC” responses, but communication of our true understanding/feelings.

- Members of the group may at any time step back from an issue or situation that is being acted on by the group if they feel that they need to or that they cannot be objective.
- We operate under strict confidentiality in both our work as an action group and as a support group. Information shared within the group, stays within the group, unless consented upon by the entire group.
- We work in tandem with Philly’s Pissed and hold our group accountable to theirs. Certain situations may also call for Philly’s Pissed to be accountable to us.
- We strive to include and support anyone who has been targeted for sexual assault, sexual abuse, gender-based assault, or gender-based abuse. This includes all sexual and gender representations and identities.
- We believe anyone can be assaulted. Sexual assault and abuse are not solely contained within heterosexual and gender-normative relationships.
- We always assume the best intentions of one another. Recognizing that none of us can be completely articulate in communicating our thoughts, we give time and space for clarity on things that may be hard to hear. We will work through the inherent difficulties between communication and misunderstanding.

## LANGUAGE (from the PSU blog)

When talking about sexual assault we use specific language and terms intentionally. There is a need to have a common understanding of the terms that we use when communicating with each other. We use the terms "survivor" and "perpetrator" often. It is important in our work and in our communities that we are always questioning our philosophies, words, and meanings. Let's take a look at the ways we have settled on these terms — we can see how we got here and where we need to push ourselves to go. Once our language gets stagnant, have our ideas also become fixed? This is the very beginning of an ongoing conversation that challenges our fundamental stance(s) on sexual assault by upsetting the language on which we rely.

We use the term survivor with the intention of using language that restores power to someone who has had power taken away from them. It is a response to the older common term of "victim" which only served to amplify the negative connotations heaped onto someone affected by sexual assault. Survivor is a positive term showing that the event has been overcome, but is still part of the person's experience. But is this a concept complete for the survivor? Are all "survivors" comfortable with the term or feel that it applies to them? When does one get to leave the title of survivor behind? It is convenient to feel like the replacement of far more negative terms like victim suit our needs, but we should not rest in contentment and instead challenge the deeper meaning of applying a single term to such a wide range of complexity and experience. When we find ourselves referring to someone as a "survivor" over and over again, perhaps it is time to step back and look at the individual's experience as a whole — outside of just the word.

Likewise, we have settled into using "perpetrator" to commonly refer to the person opposite the survivor in a situation around sexual assault. We use this term because we feel that it represents a recognition that someone did something, not is something. It gives the opportunity for change while recognizing that their actions have hurt someone. This language is imperfect in serious ways as well. As with "survivor", it may not be obvious that our definitions imply such things. We can ask the same questions that we ask when inserting the individual's position into the term of survivor. Do all perpetrators feel like the term applies to them? When does one get to leave the title of perpetrator behind? Furthermore, when we look at the larger implications of how we are approaching this work, we can see how "perpetrator" is reflecting the language of the oppressive systems we live under. While we have rejected the callous use of the term victim as used by the police — we still follow their use of the term perpetrator. We are trying to create a community based system that is outside of these institutions, so why should we replicate the same language?

These are terms of convenience and for now are the terms that we use. This is only to hope that we are challenging these ideas as we use them and are working on ways to evolve our language as our work around the issues at the heart of the matter evolves. Perhaps we should be challenging ourselves and each other to find easily understood and less problematic language to use around sexual assault.

Are there other terms you use or have heard for those who have been affected by sexual assault? Why were those used? Which ones feel good and which ones feel bad? Why? This is just the beginning. Let's nurture and honor the path which has gotten us to this place and create the space to untangle the roots and go further.

# GROUNDING OUR WORK

by Em Squires

Relationships are slippery and wet like water. I can feel a relationship touch the flesh of my heart or the skin of my back, and I know it is there because I can feel that presence asking for my attention. I cannot explain the work of Philly Stands Up without talking about relationships. They explain how I got involved and why I stay committed. Our model and processes are rooted in a criss-crossed web of friendships we share with each other, the working relationship(s) PSU builds with perpetrators of sexual assault, and each of our individual commitment to PSU as an organizing collective.

Almost two years ago, I decided to move to Philly. I couldn't afford New York City and needed to get the hell out of the Midwest. I didn't have a job, but I had a place to live with my friend Nic. Stevie and Nic raved about the magnitude of Philly's awesome-ness and how much I would love it. So I did either the stupidest or bravest thing I've ever done – I packed a van, maxed out my credit card, and dropped a cannonball into the pool of my future with a vague agenda to "find some work" and, hopefully, meet some new people who would inspire and challenge me. Sink or swim. Either way, I would feel the water.

It was Stevie who sent me the email inviting me to my first PSU meeting. I had been in Philly for just over six months, working a demoralizing service job and was painfully clawing my way out of an abusive relationship. I was not in a great place. It was a long email, certainly the most formal email I'd ever received from him, but by the time I finished reading, my pulse was racing. Work with perpetrators of sexual assault? Engage with building a culture of consent within a sex-positive framework? I didn't even really know what that meant. My own organizing background was grounded in anti-oppression youth organizing and the labor movement, with some work on gender, affirmative action, and independent media thrown into the mix. I was a teaching artist posing as a waitress – what did I know about working with perpetrators of assault? I went to the meeting not knowing what to expect. I left feeling like I had just breathed pure, undiluted oxygen for two hours.

It was early June, almost a year ago. I didn't know a person in the room except for Stevie – but I could feel the energy prickle my skin, passionately delicate and oh-so-insistent. PSU members who were about to step back from the collective for various reasons – school, family, needing space, etc – talked about the history of the group, the Points of Unity, etc – and then we all went around and talked about why we were there, present in the room on this random Sunday evening. I had never even been part of an activist group that was so committed to process that we wrote down our organizing principles! And here I was – invited into a space that would never ask me to justify why I identify as queer, that would never question the "validity" or experience of being a queer woman in a f\*\*ed up relationship with another woman, and would not only demand but value my voice, my agency, and my ability to articulate and respect my own limits. Although I was initially intimidated by my lack of relevant "experience," the energy and interests of everyone present very quickly had me doing some quick internal surveys. Fine, I had never worked in this "field," either academically or politically. However, the work I had just heard described to me was based on listening skills, relationship building, the belief that behavior can change, complex, radical, and queer-oriented analyses of power across multiple communities and potential identities, resource development, grassroots education, and a commitment to building a more sex-positive and responsible culture. I was down with that.

Our work isn't about fixing people. First of all, a perpetrator has to want to "work on their shit" – that's our colloquial umbrella phrase to refer to a perpetrator who is willing to engage with us on the issue(s) at hand. The shit can include, but is certainly not limited to: a specific incident or [repeated] behavioral pattern of emotional, physical and/or sexual assault with an intimate partner or random stranger (or any person on the interpersonal spectrum in between), substance and alcohol abuse, mental health, and any number of other influencing factors. We are not "professional" therapists or social workers or health care professionals – we are a collective of individuals with all sorts of organizing experience(s) and interests and committed to radical social change. We share and constantly engage with an evolving analysis (see our Points of Unity for some examples) which influences not only how we approach situations and perpetrators as unique experiences, but also with our own internal group dynamic and intro-collective processing.

We don't often "find" situations (what we call each separate "case," usually involving a perpetrator, a chain of events, and some request for action and/or resources) – situations usually find us. Since we've been around for a couple years, we don't have to do much self-promotion, and in reality, don't have the member-capacity to do high-volume work. What happens most often is either a perpetrator will contact us, having heard about us through some workshop, friend, referral, etc and initiate contact and somehow communicate zī's desire to "work on hir shit," OR we'll begin to work with a perpetrator via a shared situation with Philly's Pissed. [I'm using gender-neutral pronouns here for two reasons: 1) PSU seeks to

support and be an ally to trans folks in whatever ways we can, and part of that is being conscious of how we use basic pronoun language; and 2) We don't want our language to perpetuate the myth that sexual assault is limited to heteronormative situations in which the man is the perpetrator and the woman is the survivor. Anyone – regardless of gender – can be a survivor or a perpetrator of assault.]

We do not have a magic "perpetrator-free" stamp that absolves someone from whatever pain they have caused another person or community; we work to build an honest and accountable space with perpetrators. This demands a good faith effort from both directions. I have friends who upon finding out about the subject of my Sunday night meetings, are like, "What the fuck are you doing? why perpetrators? none of those programs ever work." Valid response. But PSU isn't a program. No one is more aware than we are that we can't work with every perpetrator. In some cases, perpetrators are also survivors of other situations. We try to see the whole person and the whole situation, however complex, and remain aware of our limitations.

It isn't easy to go step-by-step through our process, since it's different each time. Typically, we'll begin to work with a perpetrator either through a referral through Pissed or because someone will email us directly and ask for help or resources. We meet weekly, and commit to "tasks" – whether it's contacting someone about a workshop, working on an article for a zine, doing research, working on a situation, or being the group's email checker for the week. We do a decent job of checking our mail, and it's the responsibility of the email checker to not only check the emails, but to respond based on the time sensitivity of what is emailed (either a "do you need to talk so someone in an hour" or a "can we check in about your request at our meeting on Sunday, which is four days away" type of response). Every meeting starts with a personal check-in and ends with a check-out, and includes a mixture of debriefing current situations and "tasking" new situations, discussing or planning upcoming workshops, projects, or proposals, or doing internal educational work. Committing to work on a situation depends upon what information we know, who can do the work – not only logistically, but also with respect to personal limits and triggers.

We understand that we have to have the capacity and resources to be an ally in the specifics of any given situation. Sometimes, we don't. We are learning that it is one thing to offer advice and recommend resources and try and connect folks with local support over distance (we get a lot of emails from people in all parts of the country), but that working with perpetrators over distance is incredibly difficult. We always work in teams on situations, so working over distance in teams requires phone calls, chats, and all manners of creative communication and scheduling. When we are able to work locally, we set up initial meetings in public places where everyone feels safe. Whether working locally or over distance, we are committed to centralizing survivor demands. This can look like making sure that copies of therapy receipts are available to whomever needs to see them, facilitating meetings with community members, or helping write letters of explanation/apology.

We're not passing judgement on having long-distance relationships – but we are slowly realizing that the intimacy and honesty and reliance upon our gut feelings and intuition that we base our work upon is exponentially more facilitated by engaging with perpetrators face-to-face. It's just a different dynamic. Working with perpetrators, situation by situation, requires that we are continuously checking in with ourselves (individually and collectively) about where we are at, what we need, how we feel, what hurts, what is too much, where is the wall? We can do, feel, and trust this more when we operate in real time.

My commitment to PSU is the healthiest relationship I've ever experienced with an activist collective. I don't have to feel guilty about my time limits – for example, at the time of this writing, I haven't been able to go to an actual meeting in at least a month because of my work schedule, but my ability to commit to write this article and pull together resources for this zine is internally embraced as a valid part of our work. My emotional boundaries are respected – and furthermore, my efforts to even articulate my boundaries in the first place are appreciated as necessary. People step up and step back on a week-to-week basis. Literally. I was a little dubious that this function of the collective was actually the truth, but I personally have been proven wrong multiple times. I have learned that working with PSU demands a lot of honesty. I have to be honest with myself about my own triggers, limits, boundaries, needs. I have to trust my friends in PSU to help me both identify and respect what I can and cannot do. I have to be able to hear each of their own capacity for our work. I think our commitment to healthy activism works because we centralize it at our meetings (by framing with personal check-ins and check-outs), we have pre-existing/outside-of-PSU friendships and shared/local social networks that are incredibly powerful, and because there is a shared common and radical analysis of power and oppression – which informs not only our Points of Unity, but also our ability to just be there for each other and create a safe space (which isn't to say that we don't work to develop that space and challenge ourselves). I can only speak for myself, but I know I approach relationships (whether platonic, intimate, or somewhere in between) in a fundamentally different way since I joined PSU.

I am a more confident and thoughtful communicator and I stick up for myself and my boundaries, needs, desires, and dreams a hell of a lot more. Our space is safe, but we are not stagnant – and neither is our work nor our process.



# PHILLY STANDS UP: OUR APPROACH OUR ANALYSIS

by Esteban Kelly

Our point of departure is drastically different from mainstream analysis of sexual assault as it pertains to both survivors and perpetrators. In Philly Stands Up we always begin with an assessment of how we can support and take direction from survivors of sexual assault. Though the vast majority of our organizing is direct work with perpetrators, our view is that these efforts are perhaps the most important way that our group supports survivors and, by extension, the community of radical organizers of which we are a part. Our project is an enabling project. Healthy individuals and safe spaces provide the basic foundation and capacity for people to kick ass in reconfiguring our society into one characterized by socio-economic justice and compassionate interpersonal dynamics.

When a sexual assault is committed, the entire community is affected. As organizers, addressing the harm to survivors and the community is an important way of sustaining organizing more broadly. Thus, three fundamental approaches to our work:

- A steadfast commitment to supporting survivors through centralizing their needs to assert control and power in their lives and surroundings. Also, because Philly Stands Up is firmly against violent retribution in principle, we focus our energy into creating positive mechanisms that validate and support survivors.
- The belief in the particularity of each sexual assault situation, and with it, a unique effort and opportunity for the perpetrator to better understand physical, sexual, and emotional boundaries and communication
- The intrinsic importance of humanizing perpetrators; to be grounded in compassion as a source of strength in persevering through very difficult work and transgressing the ubiquitous alienation that haunts everyone affected by sexual assault situations.

In Philly Stands Up, we tether our work to reaching out to perpetrators of sexual assault while maintaining the centrality of the survivors, from whom we take our cues in determining the actions and progress that need to transpire for the overall healing in assault aftermath. The key mental shift that sets us on a new path in sexual assault community organizing is in refusing to distance ourselves from perpetrators of sexual assault, or even to presume that all perpetrators could be characterized by a particular moment of awful behavior.

It was only after we had spent time working with perpetrators (and of course survivors) that our current analysis really took form. On the one hand, in the aftermath of a sexual assault survivors can feel a loss of power and control over their bodies, their environment, their lives and their community. Our work, therefore, is grounded in helping to empower survivors (directly or indirectly) by aiding them in feeling safe and by assisting them in exerting control over their selves, their space and the world around them. On the other hand, the perpetrator has lost the trust of the survivor and the community. This trust is not just lost in terms of sex, but also in terms of social relationships, politics, and solidarity.

Those directly and indirectly affected by sexual assault are reluctant to trust the perpetrator as an organizer, worker, neighbor, performer, leader, roommate, or peer. So our work in Philly Stands Up is to help rebuild trust. To interrupt what may be patterns in the behavior of perpetrators of sexual assault. This commitment to work with rather than punish or criminalize the perpetrator is imperative to them once again becoming fully functional, trustworthy, and participating members of the community. In some cases survivors may still not want the perpetrator to be in their community. In Philly Stands Up we do what we can to support the wishes of the survivor and see the work of restoring trust and responsibility to perpetrators as essential to any community in which they will end up living. For that reason, one of the main functions we provide in our community is as a buffer, where we can distinguish ourselves as a more appropriate space for perpetrators to vent their concerns, frustrations, and perspective while coming to terms with and understanding the implications of their actions. In this way we hold perpetrators accountable for their analysis and behavior, and prevent future assaults by facilitating personal growth on both fronts.

One of our main contentions with most standard treatment of perpetrators of sexual assault is that they are typically dismissed as criminals. We call for a closer look at the people, their behavior and the social dynamics that surround sexual assault to be considered much more thoroughly in order to effectively rectify the damages that result from sexual assault situations and ultimately prevent them from occurring at all. In our experience, when pre-established structures like this are in place, people called out for sexual assault have been less likely to cling to defensiveness and denial since they can trust that there will be space for things to be worked out, and they are also less likely to fear immediate physical harm.

In taking a closer look at typical responses to sexual assault beyond radical communities, we noticed that

perpetrators are rarely factored into the daily lives of the community at large. Instead, perpetrators are punitively shuffled off to various criminalizing apparatuses (strongly linked to the prison industrial complex), and left out of what we see as highly gendered social services, which focus almost exclusively on (non-trans) female survivors. It must be clear that our group does not outright refute the resources (legal, social, and otherwise) that are available for these women. We certainly recognize the importance of such services and see other local organizations as allies by and large in our work. However, in doing so, we remain acutely aware of the limitations of their impact, most notably in losing sight of the ultimate goal of breaking the cycle of sexual assault, and in neglecting to serve the diversity of classes, genders, ethnicities, linguistic communities (e.g. English & Spanish speakers) and so on, that do not neatly coincide with the target population of certain women-only resources.

Those of us in Philly Stands Up refuse to pretend that sexual assault only constitutes a certain action among certain persons (i.e. rape of women by men). Anyone can be assaulted. Anyone is capable of transgressing somebody else's boundaries. Our analysis (which is by no means a "definition") encompasses and extends beyond rape- in its most strict sense- to include any situation that a survivor identifies as a breach of a particular boundary, or a lack of consent in a sexual situation. We distance ourselves from the criminal justice outlook that demands "objective facts" be presented to a judge and jury, a trend we have seen in our community, and many others. Philly Stands Up goes beyond that, seeking to reconcile all of the pieces of a situation. We acknowledge that clarity and guilt aside, people involved in the messy business that we find ourselves in are hurt, and feel that something painful and difficult has transpired, whether or not it would be "legally" recognized as assault. And regardless of the specifics, there are relationships that need to be healed or perhaps kept apart with community support.

It is worth noting that as organizers in Philly Stands Up the other half of our work is a proactive campaign to stimulate and embolden "a culture of sexual responsibility." This is a broader preventative educational project that includes a multi-sited animation of intentions, actions, and expectations that raise consciousness around all moments of (potential) sexual behavior. This is ambitious, but vitally important work. In this other mode of our work, we create workshops, trainings, and consultations where we try to stimulate deep commitments to clearer communication that fosters consent and mutuality. When we are invited to speak at conferences, or to campuses and grassroots groups we don't show up tell other people how communication is done, but rather help to tease out the local character and specificity of each group or community's norms of conduct to maximize mutual understanding and respect for personal or group boundaries. In spite of the heavy work that addressing sexual assault necessitates, we see all of that balanced by assembling working, positive models of consent. Hence one of our (many) unofficial mottoes: Consent is sexy! Each of us can be enablers for people in our lives to find new and particular ways to enact that. Imagine positive sexual encounters declined, postponed, and felt, unspoken, signaled, whispered, and yes, beckoned in a multitude of articulations.

Finally, the type of work we do in Philly Stands Up should not be ghettoized and left to the purview of sexual assault organizers from city to city, but incorporated into the routine functions of any organizing collective. Through an explosion of our project- to holistically heal communities and invigorate sexual responsibility everywhere, all of the time- we strengthen one another as organizers with deeper trust and more salient accountability. We believe in spaces, where sex and physicality are varyingly turned down, spiced up, and deal with confidentially but forthrightly. That honesty can and should be as much a part of our organizing as the daily decisions we make to upend injustice in order to exist in this world in radically new ways.

# PHILLY'S PISSED: SHIFTING THE BALANCE OF POWER IN OUR COMMUNITIES

by Timothy Colman of Philly's Pissed

I could start with a story: in college, I was marginally involved with a campaign organizing to get the institution to pay its workers a living wage. I stayed on the outskirts though. The core members of the campaign were a handful of my closest friends — and the boy who'd sexually assaulted me two weeks after I arrived on campus. I avoided his gaze for many years, at parties, in the cafeteria, in the backseats of cars. When he joined the white anti-racist group I helped start, I'd stare at my hands through meetings about building trust and acting against oppression. Afterwards, I'd go home with the sweet girl I was dating and freeze up and shake while talking in her bed.

It's a true story. I could tell it in riveting, emotive detail, but I'm just throwing it up here to say these things happen all the time. I know countless more stories like this. Maybe you do, too. Survivors of sexual assault are frequently pushed out of radical projects, out of political organizing, out of communities, because somehow perpetrators of assault and abuse have an easier time digging their feet in and staying. Or, there's no way to even start talking, no space to start addressing these "personal issues", and so we leave. So much of being assaulted is about having power taken away from you, and so much of the dominant way of dealing with survivors is about pushing these experiences into the shadows. How do survivors begin to say that we shouldn't be pushed out of our work and communities, that we are at least as important to radical movements as abusers and perpetrators?

When I moved to Philadelphia, I had a long history of involvement in radical and queer communities. And I'd also done a lot of work around sexual assault: facilitating workshops on consent and acquaintance sexual assault prevention for incoming first-years at my college, helping to run a survivors' support group, serving as a peer counselor on the college-sponsored sexual assault response team. But these two arenas had never overlapped. Sexual violence wasn't seen as an issue to organize around within the radical communities I was connected to, and there were no channels for dealing with the "I Can't Focus on the Work Cause the Boy Who Assaulted Me Keeps Coming to the Meetings" conundrum. And the political alliances I had with people also doing work around sexual violence were tenuous at best. Largely, the work we did together was about assault prevention, individual psychological healing and maybe pressing charges in a court of law or the college's disciplinary system. I found that most of the people I was working with were oblivious to the impact of sexual assault on queer, trans and male survivors. And I had serious misgivings about presenting the criminal justice system as the primary option to survivors who wanted to take action. I supported survivors who chose to engage with the law, but I knew the criminal justice system wasn't the solution; I was already working against its own kind of violence, the violence inflicted and legitimated by the state. And when I went to court to support a survivor who chose to press charges against her assaulter, I saw firsthand the abusive and traumatizing way the criminal justice system treats survivors of sexual assault. The work I was doing around sexual violence didn't contain a vision of transformation; I didn't find within it the courage and momentum to challenge the world around me to become a place where survivors of abuse and assault could live fully and wholly and be believed and respected.

Then I arrived in Philadelphia, and found Philly's Pissed and Philly Stands Up.

Philly's Pissed works against sexual assault in our communities. While the group emerged in response to a series of assaults at a punk rock show in Philadelphia, "our communities" have shifted and expanded to include overlapping queer and radical communities located in West Philadelphia as well as a web of contacts within related communities across the United States and Canada. We provide direct support to survivors, and we do education and advocacy promoting survivor autonomy and perpetrator accountability. We work in tandem with Philly Stands Up to create a community response to sexual violence and provide an alternative to the criminal justice system, which we believe frequently retraumatizes survivors

A survivor will approach a member of Philly's Pissed and ask for support in dealing with a situation. Our job is to help them figure out what support they need in that moment and help them figure out how to get it, then remain in the picture after their immediate needs are met and they begin the process of figuring out what justice and healing will mean to them. Our work is always done confidentially unless the survivor requests otherwise. Survivor support can look like a lot of different things: talking someone through a crisis, validating their emotional response to an assault, helping them find a safe place to crash, going with them to the doctor or an abortion clinic, aiding them in dealing with dissociation or panic attacks, or organizing friends to cook meals or provide childcare for them. We provide direct emotional support, but we also encourage survivors to tap into the support networks they already have. This can range from helping someone strategize about how to ask their friends or family for support, to actually providing a training on crisis support, survivor-sensitivity and the aftermath of trauma for a political organization or a

community.

Our work proceeds from a certain set of assumptions. First, we believe survivors. We trust survivors' accounts of what they have experienced. Even in radical communities, people often demand "proof" or require details of an assault before they will support a survivor. This is often invasive and hostile; it adds to the silencing and shaming that survivors often face already. We want to create communities that are free of these attitudes. Second, we believe in survivor autonomy. What that means is that the survivor is always in control and always gets to decide what happens next. We are there to facilitate the process, talk things through, suggest possible options, connect them with resources and information, and act as intermediaries. We never tell a survivor what they "should" do, and we never never never take action that the survivor has not asked us to take. Along these lines, we support and facilitate the survivor's decision-making; we do not tell them what decisions to make. Third, we use harm reduction strategies to aid survivors' in making decisions. Harm reduction is a decision-making strategy that encourages full understanding of the situation at hand, including risks, and prioritizes helping people strategize about how to best keep themselves safe while respecting the choices they make. For instance, if a survivor is really upset and just wants to go out and get wasted, we say, "Okay. You want to go out and get drunk. Do you have any concerns about the safety of doing that? How can we guard against those concerns? Are there people you can go out and get drunk with who will keep you safe and make sure you get home okay?" Similarly, if a survivor is considering pursuing legal action against a perpetrator, we provide them with the knowledge we have about what that might look like, the aspects of it that are often dehumanizing and retraumatizing, but we would never tell a survivor not to press charges or withdraw our support if they chose to do so. The harm reduction approach is crucial to our work, because we believe that part of healing is taking back power that's been taken from you. Many survivors of sexual assault struggle with feeling powerless or like they lack control over their lives. If, in the course of supporting a survivor, you mark certain actions as "healthy" and "unhealthy", offer a prescription for the correct way to heal or tell them how they should feel, you are effectively taking power away once more.

We also facilitate survivors in figuring out what they need to feel safe, whole and in control of their lives again. For many survivors, though certainly not all, this involves taking some kind of action with regard to their assault. One popular strategy is for a survivor to create a list of "demands" for the perpetrator to meet. If a survivor is interested in creating a list of demands, we encourage them to envision what would make them feel safe and more in control of their lives again, and what would make them feel that the person who assaulted them is being held accountable for their actions. Demands might include that a perpetrator do self-education around consent, write a letter taking responsibility for the assault(s), examine their substance use, or leave spaces when the survivor is present. Frequently, if a survivor creates a list of demands, they will ask that someone from Philly Stands Up works with the perpetrator in ensuring that they meet the demands.

Survivor demands have become a popular model in certain circles of how to do grassroots accountability work. I want to emphasize that there are limits to this model; for instance, it can place too much emphasis on the response of the perpetrator. Often, a perpetrator will not agree to meet demands, or will appear willing to engage on the surface but in the end, will refuse to substantively change their behavior in any way. This can be frustrating for the survivor; if they've placed all their faith in the demands model, it can be devastating. Making our communities more supportive of survivors and aware of survivor needs is a major goal of our education and advocacy work, because if we shift the balance of power in our communities in favor of survivors, we create more possibilities and channels for community accountability work. We believe it is the responsibility of our communities to end sexual assault and to get perpetrators to change. In the past, survivors have demanded that radical spaces prevent a perpetrator from entering the space when they are present; they've asked collectives to bar a perpetrator from attending organizing meetings when they are present. Other actions that survivors have taken include passing out flyers with details about the perpetrator and their patterns, distributing a public call-out asking individuals to spit on a perpetrator, and asking people to stop supporting a perpetrator's work financially.

I recently saw Andrea Smith speak, and she described how INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence began to formulate an anti-colonial response to ending gendered violence. INCITE! saw that there were staggering problems with the current options available to women of color who were survivors of violence. Most anti-domestic violence programs in the United States started out as grassroots projects but are now federally-funded non-profits; many of them even reside in police stations. Their primary solution to gendered violence increasingly seems to be to use the police and legal system to "protect" women. But initiatives such as mandatory arrest laws for domestic violence have taken control away from battered women and have not proven successful at ending gendered violence. And for women of color, whose communities are already the target of state violence (such as colonialism, police brutality, criminalization of youth, and prison abuse), calling the cops and inviting the arm of the state into their lives is often not a viable option. INCITE! saw the need for a solution that attacked state violence and interpersonal violence simultaneously. They began to organize activist institutes that asked: If there's violence in our communities, is there anything we can do besides calling the police? The idea was that adequate options did not exist — even restorative justice models often break down when they're applied to sexual assault and domestic violence situations — so communities would have to gather ideas together and try them out. Smith calls this approach "revolution through trial and error". INCITE! has produced a number of stunning resources for anyone doing community accountability work, including the INCITE! Community

Accountability Working Document [link], a list of potential strategies with which to experiment.

"Revolution through trial and error" is a good way to describe our approach. Philly's Pissed is deeply invested in doing community accountability work around sexual assault, creating alternatives to the criminal justice system, transforming our communities and ending sexual violence. But we're not experts, and we don't have all the answers. We have very few models to work from; we're pulling bits and pieces from different places, translating them to our context, patching it together and making it up as we go along. In the sexual assault work I'd done before I found Philly's Pissed, it seemed that the options available for survivors were 1) Press criminal charges, 2) Get counseling to fix the "damage" done to you by the assault, or 3) Do nothing. This set of possibilities is deeply, deeply flawed; it is paltry and inadequate. The only model for justice is offered through the disempowering, retraumatizing criminal justice system, which is frequently the site of violence itself; the only model for healing is for people to work through their trauma individually, with the help of a professional. We believe that justice and healing are intertwined, and that transforming our communities is a key aspect of both; we are working together to envision new possibilities and try them out.

We believe that support and accountability work is best done by people who are within the same communities as the survivor and can understand specific dynamics at play. Philly's Pissed is frequently in contact with survivors and supporters from across the U.S. and Canada, who contact us seeking support and advice. But distance makes it difficult to do this work effectively. Emails and the occasional phone call are a poor substitute for supporting someone in person, and it's difficult to do community accountability work or understand the context that someone is dealing with when they're 3,000 miles away. We encourage people to organize against sexual assault in their own communities, and create structures for supporting survivors and holding perpetrators accountable. In the past, we've done trainings for groups of people aiming to start projects similar to PP/PSU, explaining the way we function and problems we've run into along the way. In the end, this work looks different depending on where it's being done and who's doing it. Nonetheless, it's useful to share things we've learned along the way, and we hope that other projects can take what we share and avoid making some of the same mistakes we did.

We know that anyone can be a survivor (or a perpetrator) of sexual assault. It's important not to portray sexual assault as though it only happens along clear identity lines; in particular, it's important to recognize that it is not just women who are assaulted and it is not just men who are perpetrators of assault. However, sexual assault is often used as a tool of power and violence within a web of systems and structures that deny people's bodily autonomy and both individual and community self-determination. All of our lives are touched by these oppressive structures, but we're not all disempowered in the same way; we don't all face the same kinds of violence. Philly's Pissed is constantly working to understand the context that swirls around our work, and to learn from similar work being done by other groups and in other contexts.

Survivors of abuse and assault need to be able to articulate what they need, and demand it, with the knowledge that they will be believed and supported. Even within radical communities, there's a pervasive tendency to blame and silence survivors. When sexual assault causes divisive upheaval within radical organizing, when violence causes fragmentation in our communities, the survivors of that violence are frequently blamed for speaking up about it, told the fallout is their fault, that they are "hurting the struggle." Philly's Pissed seeks to shift the culture of our radical communities to one that believes survivors and supports us in stating our truths and taking up space.



## Self Care NOW!: Sustaining Ourselves, Sustaining Each Other

Who hasn't experienced organizing burn-out? In political organizing, art projects, event planning, collective house projects... it's always a struggle to put our time and energy into these amazing projects and to keep our heads above water; to do this work WHILE we are taking good care of our bodies, our moods and our hearts. Finding a balance of time, commitments, hard work, lots of sleep and fun are key ingredients for building a group that will LAST. This is true of any political/art project, but it cannot be emphasized enough in work around sexual assault and abuse. These matters pull at our heart strings, can be triggering, and often make us feel as though every meeting or e-mail is a crisis. Philly Stands Up Collective prioritizes individual self care and group self care. Without these, we'd never be around today with more energy than when we started.

### STRUCTURALLY

\*Be Strategic. You can gain clarity about who you are and what you do by starting with a strategic and long-term vision. As an organization ask yourself key questions: What is the need we are trying to fulfill? Who do we serve? What do we want to be doing in 6 months? In 2 years? Check out the Philly Stands Up's "Starting a Group? Start Here!" document for a fuller list of questions to ask your group at the beginning.

\* Be Clear. As an organization, be concise about what your role and your project is; If you only work on situations locally, it's ok to say "no" to someone from out of town. If your group only gives workshops, don't agree to facilitate a mediation session. The more firm and articulate you are about your mission, skills and capacity, the less energy you will have to put in to rethinking who you are and inventing new resources to offer. You will be less effective if you are constantly trying to change and bend who your group is and what you do, and you will be stressed! It's ok to offer exactly what you can.

\*Non Crisis Framework. While responding to instances of sexual assault and violence are community crises, having a more whole framework for your organization will ensure that you have other fundamental projects, goals and successes to anchor you. This could be education, publications, fundraising, or events. If crisis intervention is your sole purpose, your collective/organization will be controlled by specific urgent trauma, while ideally, your organization is grounded and prepared to solidly guide community through crisis instead of getting stuck in it.

## ORGANIZATIONALLY

\*Have specific meeting times with time limits! It can feel stressful to go to a meeting that may end up lasting for 4 hours. Come up with regular meeting schedules and meeting lengths that you stick to, this way you know exactly what to expect and can better commit to following through.

\*Rotate responsibilities. Trade off on who facilitates meetings, who keeps and sends out notes and who hosts or provides snacks. This will give everyone the chance to try and feel comfortable in each role, and will prevent folks from getting bored or weighed down by extra obligations they aren't interested in. This is also a great way to mix up traditionally and oppressive gender roles.

\*Record Keeping! The more closely you document your work (meeting notes, workshop outlines, email trails, journal type accounts of decision making and why decisions had to be made, etc.) the less reinventing the wheel you will have to do! It pays to know why a group made large structural decisions, or how the group got out of small logistical binds. It feels really good and empowering to know that you have a lot of the answers to key questions that may come up as your group grows and progresses.

\*Prepared for Turnover. It's almost a guarantee that at some point, the membership of your group will change (especially if you are around for a long time!!). Have a system for what happens when old members leave and new members join. Record keeping will help that a lot. When an individual leaves you don't want their knowledge, skills or experiences to leave as well. Have structure in place to move forward with membership changes smoothly so that the work can continue. We like a dinner party with old and new members, where old members can share lots of anecdotes, pitfalls and lessons learned. This is also a great way to honor old members and welcome new members so everyone feels as valuable as they are!

\*Internal anti-oppression work. Anti-oppression work is at the crux of all our organizing. Think about how this fits in to your own group. Race. Class. Gender. Ethnicity. Sexuality. Size. Age. Disability. Closely working with a small group of people will bring this up (I mean, hey, everything brings (anti)Oppression up, right?). Have conversations about your overlapping and diverging identities and experiences. Educate yourselves internally so that you can name oppressive dynamics when they come up, deal with them, learn, transform and then move through to continue doing this work.

\*Semi closed group. This may not be the answer for every organization in every community, but we find that having a closed group (only active members come to meetings) means that we can build trust much more easily, and it allows our meeting space to feel safe and intimate. It also means you don't have to be constantly negotiating shifting group dynamics. Feeling comfortable and relaxed in meeting space goes a long way to cutting down on stress and remaining present at meetings.

\*Check-Ins/ Check-Outs. Start every meeting with a check-in. This lets everyone be real about their energy level. Work was awful? You've got a little bit of a headache? You're waiting for your date to text you back and you can't stop checking your phone? Naming your mood and your capacity in that moment is really helpful for the whole group. Checking-out offers the same thing. How are you feeling? More energized than when you started? Dreading a specific task you said you'd take on? Way more relaxed now that your date finally texted you back? It is also really good practice to take a minute and really think about how you are feeling. Staying in touch with your mood and body is important in sexual assault/violence work.

## INDIVIDUALLY

\*Making time for Personal Needs. The more whole people we are, the better activists and organizers we will be. Support each other in doing the other wonderful things in your lives. You have a mahjong game on Tuesday night? Got it, we'll send you the notes from that meeting. Kick some ass! It's your housemates' top-surgery benefit party? Holler! We'll come up with a different deadline that works.

\*Accommodate different levels of involvement. Make space for members to have capacity for different things. Maybe someone can commit to being at most meetings, but can't do any work outside of meetings. Maybe someone can be present in email conversations, but can't make it to meetings. Things are super busy at work? It's finals at school? Your hot Punk-Bluegrass-Electro-Metal Fusion band is going on tour for 2 months? Cool. We'll be here when you get back. just bring us some t-shirts. The more flexible the group can be for differing levels of involvement, the more steady your organization will be, the less resentful you'll feel of each other, and the better you'll be caring for yourselves. It feels awesome to be in a group where commitments don't come from a place of guilt or obligation.

\*Basic self care. You GOTTA take care. Eat right. Get enough sleep. If you are feeling



terrible and stressed, SKIP the meeting and take a bath. If a specific situation of sexual assault is triggering or getting in the way of your own healing process, let your collective members know and help you figure out exactly what you need. There is nothing more important than your own health and stability.

\*Fun-Times. Know each other. Like each other. Love each other. This is hard hard work. Don't forget to have a blast with one another. Go get a drink after a meeting sometimes. Get ready for some epic fun on road trip on the way to a workshop/conference. We love a retreat! A weekend away where we can do some big structural building work on our collective and also CHILL. Laugh, play cards, weird parlor games, cook with each other, gossip with each other, serenade each other. You aren't going to get far if you forget to have some honest fun.

## From Generation FIVE

### *About generationFIVE*

generationFIVE works to change the root causes of child sexual abuse, so that we can truly prevent it. We work to respond to present and past experiences of CSA [child sexual abuse] in ways that help to change the community and social norms that perpetuate it. We organize to change our community and social values and norms, so that child sexual abuse no longer happens. gen5 holds a vision of liberation, justice and sustainability for all of our futures.

### *Our Approach*

generationFIVE's analysis of intersecting systemic oppression and trauma and resilience leads to gen5's approach of Transformative Justice (TJ). Through extensive community work and development with numerous national organizations since 2002, g5 has developed this Transformative Justice approach. To read gen5's Transformative Justice document and learn more about its background as well as application, contact our Program Director.

Transformative Justice links how we respond to incidences and experiences of child sexual abuse to social justice. This means that we work to respond to experiences of child sexual abuse (both current and past) while also changing the community beliefs and practices, and social institutions and norms that keep child sexual abuse going. Also, we do not use nor support responses to child sexual abuse that perpetuate systemic oppression and/or trauma.

### *TJ Definition*

Transformative Justice is an approach which secures individual justice in cases of CSA while transforming structures of community and social injustice that are perpetuated by and perpetuate CSA.

Transformative Justice addresses incidences of child sexual abuse and social conditions. This is necessary for prevention and revealing the intersection of child sexual abuse with other social justice issues. Transformative Justice orients toward more choices for individuals and communities.

The Transformative Justice approach to child sexual abuse challenges people to integrate their emotional and political commitments to change. It holds the two together in a set of principles and practices that are focused on achieving individual and social transformation.

### *TJ Goals*

We locate a Transformative Justice approach and response inside of community networks and relationships, with support and alliance from broader TJ collaborative. Transformative Justice seeks to provide survivors of CSA with immediate safety and long-term healing and reparations while holding offenders of child sexual abuse accountable within and by their communities. This accountability includes stopping immediate abuse, making a commitment to not engage in future abuse, and offering reparations for past abuse. Such offender accountability requires community responsibility and access to on-going support and

transformative healing for offenders. Beyond survivors and offenders, Transformative Justice also seeks to transform inequity and power abuses within communities. Through building the capacity of communities to increase justice internally, Transformative Justice seeks to support collective action towards addressing larger issues of injustice and oppression.

*The goals of Transformative Justice as a response to child sexual abuse are:*

- o Survivor safety, healing and agency
- o Offender accountability and transformation
- o Community response and accountability
- o Transformation of the community and social conditions that create and perpetuate child sexual abuse, i.e. systems of oppression, exploitation, domination, and State violence.

*TJ also seeks to...*

- o Build collective power for liberation efforts through addressing the inequity and injustice happening inside of communities
- o Build capacity of individuals and collectives to address larger conditions of inequality and injustice

#### *Transformative Justice Practices*

The principles we have described are intended to guide the implementation of a Transformative Justice response to child sexual abuse. The practices discussed here take a closer look at what this response involves. This set of practices does not comprise a model that has been applied and evaluated but, rather, the best describes what generation FIVE knows so far from its work with communities. As such, this account of the practices of Transformative Justice is a work in progress to which generation FIVE welcomes feedback.

The sequence in which the practices of Transformative Justice are presented is not intended to imply a linear set of steps. The sequence in which these practices are applied will depend on specific circumstances, but it is important that a Transformative Justice process touch upon them all. Generation FIVE believes that most situations will require cycling through these practices several times at various moments and to different depths. In implementing any of these practices, people will face a number of emotional challenges. So that we can better prepare to effectively respond to these challenges, they are discussed in more detail in Appendix 2 of our Transformative Justice paper.

Practices of Transformative Justice include:

- o Strengthening community capacity
- o Naming child sexual abuse
- o Assessing level of concern

- o Developing a safety strategy
- o Supporting healing and resilience
- o Holding accountability
- o Working for community transformation
- o Collective resistance, vision and strength

*Principles of Transformative Justice:*

**Liberation**

Liberation is central to the political project of Transformative Justice. We envision relationship, communities, and society liberated from the intergenerational legacies of violence and colonization. Efforts to secure individual and personal justice in cases of child sexual abuse must also work for this vision of social justice and political liberation.

The application of Transformative Justice centers the principle of liberation by addressing current manifestations of multiple, intersecting forms of intimate, community and State violence. Rather than assign narrow blame on individualized “criminals,” the Transformative Justice model seeks to expand the very notion of who is responsible by mobilizing bystanders, challenging collusions with power, and situating individual interventions in the larger context of social justice movement. We seek methods of attaining justice that challenge State and systemic violence rather than attempting to reform or re-direct it. Our task is to create conditions of cooperation, respect, self-determination, and equitable access to resources while building community-based institutions operating within values and practices that make possible a world without child sexual abuse.

Thus, when we name liberation as a guiding principle of this work, we mean that a critical feature of a Transformative Justice approach to child sexual abuse is that it seeks to build the capacity of organizations, communities, and intimate networks to respond to the needs of individuals and relationships within a broader liberation politic. We envision our organizations and movements as supporting the healing, accountability and transformation of individuals and relationships while engaging people in collective action to challenge the conditions of oppression and violence experienced by communities. As we increase our capacity to transform the histories of violence and oppression as they play out in our relationships and cultures, we believe our effectiveness, visions, and hope will grow.

**Shifting Power**

Transformative Justice challenges definitions of power based on domination, exploitation, violence, privilege, and entitlement. Instead, we seek to build power and forms of shared power based on equity, cooperation, and self-determination. Transformative Justice responses seek to shift power away from those individuals, community institutions and systems that aim to maintain oppression toward individuals, collectives, and community and alternative institutions that promote Transformative Justice and liberation. Specifically, in a Transformative Justice intervention, we will need to shift power from those who sexually

abuse children and the power that supports their behavior to survivors, allies, and the Collective aligned with a Transformative Justice approach.

Historically, survivors' experiences have been silenced to maintain the arrangements of power that characterize abuse and/or avoid conflict within families or communities. A key component of shifting power is to support the self-determination of survivors. In practice, this means supporting a survivors' decision to challenge, prevent, or respond to a violation intended to take their power. At the same time, because Transformative Justice is a community intervention model, it is important to stress that the survivor alone does not have the sole responsibility of determining what justice will look like. A survivor's safety must never be compromised for the comfort of a family or community, or in order to avoid potential conflict that addressing violence might surface. For interventions in child sexual abuse, this is especially important because in the case of current incidents, the immediate survivor is a child. Given the power relationship between children and adults, children cannot be responsible for surfacing and then making decisions about how to intervene and prevent child sexual abuse and other forms of violence.

We honor the voices, experiences, and rights of children and challenge the adultism that denies children their age-appropriate self-determination while supporting their development toward finding their power. Yet, we see the responsibility for intervening in and preventing child sexual abuse and other forms of violence to be our collective responsibility. More broadly, no matter what the age of the survivor, we do not believe intervention and prevention should be solely the responsibility of survivors. However, there may be times when the desires of any given survivor contradict our political commitments. Such times require supporting the power and self-determination of the survivor in a way that does not compromise our political commitments.

An example of this might be that the (adult or child) survivor does not want to address child sexual abuse and would rather 'move on'. On the other hand, the community may feel it is critical to confront the offending behavior in the interests of the safety of other children and the community. Thus, supporting the survivor's safety and their self-determination while moving toward broader transformation and collective self-determination might mean that the survivor is not involved in the intervention themselves. It could mean that they remain informed about the intervention but not involved. Either way, Transformative Justice requires that the survivor's interests are central an intervention and prevention plan; however, in the aforementioned case, intervention is happening on behalf of the survivor but in the interest of the Collective.

Child sexual abuse is an attack not only on its survivors but on our collective safety, values, politics, and commitments. Therefore, we collectively have a vital stake in intervention. Collective responses support broader shifts in power toward equity within intimate and community relationships and networks. The voices, experiences, and leadership of all those who share this vision are required if we are going to shift power and transform our relationships, families, and communities as we address and prevent the violence in our lives.

## Safety

We understand safety as liberation from violence, exploitation, and the threat of further acts of violence. The safety that we seek manifests on three intersecting and mutually reinforcing levels. On an individual level, a survivors' safety from immediate violence and the threat of further acts of violence (sexual, economic, etc.) is central. For the community, safety comes from fostering community norms and practices which challenge violence and support conditions for liberation. Lastly, across communities and collectives, safety means mutual accountability, challenging power dynamics within and between groups, guarding against backlash, and building strong alliances so that we can collectively support and protect each other from interference and targeting by the State.

We recognize that absolute safety is not something that we can guarantee people. Resistance to abuses of power and exploitation—in both individual and collective manifestations — will inevitably require some risk to our safety. However, taking these risks is essential to transforming our lives, relationships, communities, and movements. Risks are also an act of courage and self-determination when taken on with full consciousness of both the consequences and the potential for liberation. We realize safety is relative. Engaging in Transformative Justice means that individuals and collectives may risk the short-term safety that accompanies not challenging or colluding with violence.

But, in the long run, we believe taking these risk will lead us closer to long-term liberation from abuses of power, exploitation, and oppression. However, the decision to take these risks can only be made by those individuals and communities most likely to suffer the consequences of inaction—not by those less impacted. We are committed to developing new practices that we believe will bring about safety and justice. We must consciously and consensually take on this experimentation. As we engage in Transformative Justice-based models of resistance and intervention, we will gain experience, evaluate, and revise our practice. We do so in the service of our vision and in the struggle for liberation.

## Accountability

Accountability is not only a critical mechanism of justice; it is a powerful tool of transformation. We hold ourselves individually and collectively accountable for transforming oppressive and abusive dynamics that prevent us from being in integrity with and realizing our visions of justice. People that commit violence are not born that way; they are created by their histories and given permission by the inequitable practices and arrangements of power within the society in which we live. Accountability in relationships means we are willing to interrupt problematic behaviors or dynamics and then support a process for transforming those behaviors.

Accountability at a minimum requires:

- Acknowledging the harm done even if it is unintended;
- Acknowledging its negative impact on individuals and the community;

- Making appropriate reparations for this harm to individuals and the community;
- Transforming attitudes and behaviors to prevent further violence and contribute toward liberation;
- Engaging bystanders to hold individuals accountable, and toward shifting community institutions and conditions that perpetuate and allow violence; and
- Building movements that can shift social conditions to prevent further harm and promote liberation, including holding the State accountable for the violence it perpetrates and condones.

Transformative Justice interventions seek concrete accountability from individuals who are violent. Simultaneously, they engage bystanders and build community responsibility for creating conditions that provide opportunities for accountability and change. Transformative Justice interventions seek accountability from bystanders for their collusion with violence while having compassion for their own histories and relationships of dependency, fear or love of the people they allowed to sexually abuse children that they know. The goal of this process is moving a non-protective bystander toward taking action to stop violence, creating accountability, and engaging in the transformation of abusive power dynamics.

Transformative Justice needs mechanisms of leverage and influence in order to ensure short and long-term accountability. These mechanisms may include: community relationships and identity, sanctions, monitoring agreements, consequences for non-compliance with agreements, etc. Different contexts will call for different methods and mechanisms. Different levels of concern about the behavior, likelihood of re-offending, ability to mobilize support for abusive behavior, and commitment to transformation will call for different accountability methods and mechanisms. Mechanisms have to evolve as the process and demonstration of accountability by the person who was abusive shifts. Ensuring immediate safety and long-term accountability may at times require self-defense by individuals or communities. This could take the form of force or removal, which we see as distinct from violence or oppression.

### **Building Collective Action**

One of the central aspects of child sexual abuse, perhaps more than any other form of violence, is the isolation the abuse occurs within and creates. Thus, a key principle of a Transformative Justice approach must be to break this isolation and build collective action to secure individual justice in cases of child sexual abuse while transforming structures of social injustice that perpetuate such abuse.

This principle invites people to build with others when taking responsibility and action to address child sexual abuse. However formally or informally such collective action is constituted, it is important to remember that a Collective does not have to be a geographic entity, but rather shares a set of practices, values, beliefs, culture, politics, experiences, history, geography or relationships through which “belonging” to the group is established.

Transformative Justice breaks the isolation of individuals, which is created by violence, and which promotes further violence. Transformative Justice moves toward collective responsibility and action to challenge oppressive relations of power and to create community spaces that support liberation while building the capacity and self-determination of individuals to fully participate in collective liberation.

Building collective action, the results of collaborative alliances and movements, can also protect us from backlash. An individual or small collective of people implementing intervention or prevention without broader support can be vulnerable to being targeted by the same powers used to perpetrate or collude with abuse. Even in the absence of such targeting, an isolated collective is unlikely to be able to sustain the emotional and political pressures of engaging in Transformative Justice work over time.

By building collective action, we demonstrate our commitment to challenging the targeting of other communities. We build powerful movements that will ultimately be capable of challenging the violence and abuse of the State.

### **Honoring the Diversity of Our Communities, Cultures, Histories and Experiences**

Transformative Justice approaches should respond to the historic, cultural, geographic, or population specific experiences and needs of the community in which they are implemented. We are committed to creating cross-community or cross-national Transformative Justice standards and mechanisms for support and accountability that continue to be responsive to local, evolving needs. An example of a standard might be that those working within a Transformative Justice framework never leverage racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, or classism to mobilize a community to hold someone who sexually abuses children accountable.

Our commitment to collective self-determination toward liberation requires that we support those in closest relationship with the community providing leadership toward addressing violence. Such leadership is in the best position to assess the consequences and potential of any intervention and prevention work. This leadership will also be able to better mobilize intimate and community networks toward taking the consensual and necessary risks to implement Transformative Justice. Although effective Transformative Justice approaches will challenge cultural norms that support abuse, shifting cultural norms does not mean rejecting cultures wholesale, or labeling some cultures more 'civilized,' moral, or salvageable than others. We honor the role of culture in supporting and transmitting legacies of resilience and resistance. We believe that cultural traditions can be shifted by those within the culture and reoriented toward the liberation of those who share and practice it.

Cultural relativism can be a setback and a dangerous argument. Cultural relativism manipulates the value of cultural diversity and integrity for the sake of preserving traditional arrangements of power that are harmful. Cultural relativism assumes that culture is static and that there is danger, rather than liberation, in the shifting of traditions. It assumes that harmful practices were inherent to the culture rather than imported or a reflection of abusive relationships of power. People with different agendas can use relativist arguments to justify and minimize violence, harm caused, intent, and willfulness of actions. Those in the best



position to challenge cultural relativism are those who are part of the culture in which the practices or behavior take place. Attempts to challenge cultural practices by people outside of the community or culture can result in defensiveness. This can make it more difficult for those inside of the community who want to challenge harmful practices, as their activism is likely to be interpreted as betraying, rather than improving, the community.

As we develop collective, community-based processes of Transformative Justice, we are committed to maintaining their flexibility and responsiveness in order to prevent community definitions and processes from becoming rigid, administrative bodies akin to those of the State.

## **Sustainability**

We have a responsibility to create intervention and prevention strategies that are sustainable over time and throughout the transformation process. Generation FIVE, or any group supporting Transformative Justice-based interventions, must be conscious and transparent about the support we offer and the limitations of what we can provide at any given stage in an intervention. We must also recognize the long-term challenges of building Transformative Justice approaches, processes, and alternative institutions. Like any organizing project, we seek to build the internal capacity of intimate and community networks and collectives toward this sustainability.

Transformative Justice models need to plan for the sustainability of their responses. They must be able to support survivor safety and healing, maintain ongoing accountability and transformation for people who abuse, build bystander and community accountability, and redefine community and social norms. Various resources—financial, emotional, political, and material—will be necessary to sustain Transformative Justice responses and organizing.

This might include such things as:

- Strategic relationships
- Methods of individual and collective healing
- Mechanisms of accountability; organizational and community infrastructure to support collective action
- Opportunities for individual and collective consciousness-raising or political education
- Strong internal commitments to the collective and the larger process

Different communities have different relationships to State resources, institutions, violence, and support. Their access to alternative options than the State may vary. For example, families with more resources can afford therapy to address sexual abuse rather than engaging with the State. People without any community support to challenge their experiences of violence may see the State as their only resource. In the face of the devastation and urgency caused by violence in our lives, it can be difficult to do the work in ways that are sustainable. However, we believe the work itself can sustain us if we build support through collective action—with the vision of immediate safety and transformation over time.

## Taking Risks

### Implementing Grassroots Community Accountability Strategies

Written by a collective of women of color from Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA): Alisa Bierria, Onion Carrillo, Ebony Colbert, Xandra Ibarra, Theryn Kiyomasud/Vashti, and Shale Maulana

Sexual violence is often treated as a hyperdelicate issue that can only be addressed by trained professionals such as law enforcement or medical staff. Survivors are considered "damaged," pathologized beyond repair. Aggressors are perceived as "animals," unable to be redeemed or transformed.<sup>1</sup> These extreme attitudes alienate everyday community members—friends and family of survivors and aggressors—from participating in the critical process of supporting survivors and holding aggressors accountable for abusive behavior. Ironically, survivors overwhelmingly turn to friends and family for support, safety, and options for accountability strategies.<sup>2</sup>

Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), a grassroots anti-rape organizing project in Seattle, has worked with diverse groups who have experienced sexual violence within their communities to better understand the nature of sexual violence and rape culture, nurture community values that are inconsistent with rape and abuse, and develop community-based strategies for safety, support, and accountability. Using some general guidelines as the bones for each community-based process, we work with survivors and their communities to identify their own unique goals, values, and actions that add flesh to their distinct safety/accountability models. In this paper, we discuss these community accountability guidelines and provide three illustrative examples of community-based models developed by activists in Seattle.

Because social networks can vary widely on the basis of values, politics, cultures, and attitudes, we have found that having a one-size-fits-all community accountability model is not a realistic or respectful way to approach an accountability process. However, we have also learned that there are some important organizing principles that help to maximize the safety and integrity of everyone involved—including the survivor, the aggressor, and other community members. An accountability model must be creative and flexible enough to be a good fit for the uniqueness of each community's needs, while also being disciplined enough to incorporate some critical guidelines as the framework for its strategy.<sup>3</sup> Below is a list of ten guidelines—our accountability principles—that we have found important and useful to consider. (We've chosen to alternate personal pronouns throughout, as this reflects the realities of our work.)

### Recognize the humanity of everyone involved.

It is imperative that the folks who organize the accountability process are clear about recognizing the humanity of all people involved, including the survivor(s), the aggressor(s), and the community. This can be easier said than done. It is natural, and even healthy, to feel rage at the aggressor for assaulting another person, especially a person that we care about. However, it is critical that we are grounded in a value of recognizing the complexity of each person, including ourselves. Given the needs and values of a particular community, an accountability process for the aggressor can be confrontational, even angry, but it should not be dehumanizing.

Dehumanization of aggressors contributes to a larger context of oppression for everyone. For example, alienation and dehumanization of the offending person increases a community's vulnerability to being targeted for disproportional criminal justice oppression through heightening the "monster-ness" of another community member. This is especially true for marginalized communities (such as people of color, people with disabilities, poor people, and queer people) who are already targeted by the criminal justice system because of their "otherness." When one person in our community is identified as a "monster," that identity is often generalized to everyone in the community. This generalization can even be made by other members of the marginalized community because of internalized oppression.<sup>4</sup>

Also, dehumanizing the aggressor undermines the process of accountability for the whole community. If we separate ourselves from the offenders by stigmatizing them then we fail to see how we contributed to conditions that allow violence to happen.

### Prioritize the self-determination of the survivor.

Self-determination is the ability to make decisions according to one's own free will and self-guidance without outside pressure or coercion. When a person is sexually assaulted, self-determination is profoundly undermined. Therefore, the survivor's values and needs should be prioritized, recognized, and respected.

The survivor should not be objectified or minimized as a symbol of an idea instead of an actual person. It is critical to take into account the survivor's vision for when, why, where, and how the abuser will be held accountable. It is also important to recognize that the survivor must have the right to choose to lead and convey the plan, participate in less of a leadership role, or not be part of the organizing at all. The survivor should also have the opportunity to identify who will be involved in this process. Some survivors may find it helpful for friends or someone from outside the community to help assess and facilitate the process with their community. To promote explicit shared responsibility, the survivor and his community can also negotiate and communicate boundaries and limits around what roles they are willing to play and ensure that others perform their roles in accordance with clear expectations and goals.

### Identify a simultaneous plan for safety and support for the survivor as well as others in the community.

Safety is complex and goes far beyond keeping your doors locked, walking in well,

lit areas, and carrying a weapon or a cell phone. Remember that a "safety plan" requires us to continue thinking critically about how our accountability process will impact our physical and emotional well-being.<sup>3</sup> Consider questions such as: How will the abuser react when he is confronted about his abusive behavior? How can we work together to demechanize the aggressor's strategies? Remember, one does not have control over the aggressor's violence, but one can have control how to prepare and respond to it.

Violence can escalate when an aggressor is confronted about his behavior. Threats of revenge, suicide, stalking, or threats to disclose personal information, or threats to create barriers for you to work, eat, sleep, or simply keep your life private may occur. The aggressor may also use intimidation to frighten the survivor and others. He or she may use privilege such as class, race, age, or sociopolitical status to hinder your group from organizing. While planning your offense, organizers must also prepare to implement a defense in case of aggressor retaliation. If your situation allows you to do so, organizers can also alert other members of the community about your plan and prepare them for how the abuser may react.

Organizers must also plan for supporting the survivor and themselves. It is easy to become so distracted with the accountability process that we forget that someone was assaulted and needs our emotional support. It is likely that there is more than one survivor of sexual assault and/or domestic violence in any one community of people. Other survivors within the organizing group may be triggered during the community accountability process. Organizing for accountability should not be just about the business of developing a strategy to address the aggressor's behavior, but also about creating a loving space for community-building and real care for others. Organizers should also try to be self-aware about their own triggers and create a plan for support for themselves as well. Sometimes it's helpful to have a separate group of friends that can function as a support system for the survivor as well as for the organizers.

#### Carefully consider the potential consequences of your strategy.

Before acting on any plan, always make sure that your group has tried to anticipate all of the potential outcomes of your strategy. Holding someone accountable for abuse is difficult and the potential responses from the abuser are numerous. For example, if you choose to use the media to publicize the aggressor's behavior, you might think of the consequences on the safety and privacy of the survivor and the organizers involved. But you will also have to consider the chances of the media spinning the story in a way that is not supportive to your values, or the possibility that the story outrages another person outside of your community so much that she decides to respond by physically threatening the aggressor, or the chance that the media will give the aggressor a forum to justify the abusive behavior. This need to "what if" an accountability strategy is not meant to discourage the process, but to make sure that organizers are careful to plan for possible outcomes. Your first plan may need to be shifted, modified, and tweaked as you go. You may find that you are working to hold this person accountable for a longer period of time than you expected. There may be a split in your community because of the silence surrounding abuse, especially sexual and domestic violence. You may feel that you are

further isolating the survivor and yourselves from the community. Think of the realistic outcomes of your process to hold someone accountable in your community. Your process may not be fully successful or it may yield constructive results. Whatever your outcome, you may find that you are more prepared and skilled to facilitate a process of holding others in your community or circle of friends accountable in the future.

#### Organize collectively.

It is not impossible to organize an accountability process by one's self, but it is so much more difficult. A group of people is more likely to do a better job of thinking critically about strategies because there are more perspectives and experiences at work. Organizers are less likely to burn out quickly if more than one or two people can share the work as well as emotionally support one another. It is much harder to be targeted by backlash when there is a group of people acting in solidarity with one another. A group of people can hold each other accountable to staying true to the group's shared values. Also, collective organizing facilitates strong community-building, which undermines isolation and helps to prevent future sexual violence.

#### Make sure everyone in the accountability-seeking group is on the same page with their political analysis of sexual violence.

Sometimes members of a community organizing for accountability are not working with the same definition of "rape," the same understanding of concepts like "consent" or "credibility," or the same assumption that rape is a manifestation of oppression. In order for the group's process to be sustainable and successful, organizers must have a collective understanding of what rape is and how rape functions in our culture. For example, what if the aggressor and his supporters respond to the organizers' call for accountability by demanding that the survivor prove that she was indeed assaulted or else they will consider her a liar, guilty of slander? Because of our legal structure that is based on the idea of "innocent until proven guilty," and rape culture that doubts the credibility of women in general, it is a common tactic to lay the burden of proof on the survivor.<sup>4</sup> If the group had a feminist, politicized understanding of rape, they might be able to anticipate this move as part of a larger cultural phenomenon of discrediting women when they assert that violence has been done to them.

This process pushes people to identify rape as a political issue and articulate a political analysis of sexual violence. A shared political analysis of sexual violence opens the door for people to make connections between moments of rape and the larger culture in which rape occurs. A consciousness of rape culture prepares us for the need to organize beyond the accountability of an individual aggressor. We also realize we must organize for accountability and transformation of institutions that perpetuate rape culture such as the military, prisons, and the media.

Lastly, when the aggressor is a progressive activist, a rigorous analysis of rape culture can be connected to that individual's own political interests. A political analysis of rape culture can become the vehicle that connects the aggressor's act of violence to the machinations of oppression in general, and even to his own politics.

cal agenda. Sharing this analysis may also help gain support from the aggressor's activist community when they understand their own political work as connected to the abolition of rape culture and, of course, rape.

**Be clear and specific about what your group wants from the aggressor in terms of accountability.**

When your group calls for accountability, it's important to make sure that "accountability" is not simply an elusive concept that folks in the group are ultimately unclear about. Does accountability mean counseling for the aggressor? An admission of guilt? A public or private apology? Or is it specific behavior changes? Here are some examples: You can organize in our community, but you cannot be alone with young people. You can come to our parties, but you will not be allowed to drink. You can attend our church, but you must check in with a specific group of people every week so that they can determine your progress in your reform.

Determining the specific thing that the group is demanding from the aggressor pushes the group to be accountable to its own process. It is very easy to slip into a perpetual rage that wants the aggressor to suffer in general, rather than be grounded in a planning process that identifies specific steps for the aggressor to take. And why not? We are talking about rape, after all, and rage is a perfectly natural and good response. However, though we should make an intentional space to honor rage, it's important for the purposes of an accountability process to have a vision for specific steps the aggressor needs to take in order to give her a chance for redemption. Remember, the community we are working to build is not one where a person is forever stigmatized as a "monster" no matter what she does to transform, but a community where a person has the opportunity to provide restitution for the damage she has done.

**Let the aggressor know your analysis and your demands.**

This guideline may seem obvious, but we have found that this step is often forgotten! For a number of reasons—including being distracted by the other parts of the accountability process, the aggressor building distance between himself and the organizers, or the desire for the organizers to be anonymous for fear of backlash—we sometimes do not make a plan to relay the specific steps for accountability to the aggressor. Publicly asserting that the person raped another, insisting that he must be accountable for the act, and convincing others in the community to be allies to your process may all be important aspects of the accountability plan—but they are only the beginning of any plan. Public shaming may be a tool that makes sense for your group, but it is not an end for an accountability process. An aggressor can be shamed, but remain unaccountable for his behavior. Organizers must be grounded in the potential of their own collective power, confident about their specific demands as well as the fact that they are entitled to make demands, and then use their influence to compel the aggressor to follow through with their demands.

**Consider help from the aggressor's community**

Family and friends can be indispensable when figuring out an accountability plan. Organizers may hesitate to engage the aggressor's close people, assuming that friends and family may be more likely to defend the aggressor against reports that he has done such a horrible thing. This is a reasonable assumption—it's hard to believe that a person we care about is capable of violently exploiting another—but it is worth the time to see if you have allies in the aggressor's close community. They have more credibility with the aggressor; it is harder for her to refuse accountability if she is receiving the demand for accountability from people she cares about; it strengthens your group's united front; and, maybe most interestingly, it may compel the aggressor's community to critically reflect on their own values and cultural norms that may be supporting people to violate others. For example, this may be a community of people that does not tolerate rape, but enjoys misogynist humor or music or doesn't support women in leadership. Engaging friends and family in the accountability process may encourage them to consider their own roles in sustaining rape culture.

Also, the participation of the aggressor's close people ensures long-term follow through with the accountability plan. Friends can check in with him to make sure he is attending counseling, for example. Also, the aggressor may need his own support system. What if the intervention causes the aggressor to fall into a deep suicidal depression? The organizers may not have the desire or the patience to support the aggressor, nor should they need to. However, the aggressor's family and friends can play an important role of supporting the aggressor to take the necessary steps of accountability in a way that is sustainable for everyone.

**Prepare to be engaged in the process for the long haul.**

Accountability is a process, not a destination, and it will probably take some time. The reasons why people rape are complicated and it takes time to shift the behavior. Furthermore, community members who want to protect the aggressor may slow down or frustrate organizing efforts. Even after the aggressor takes the necessary steps that your group has identified for him to be accountable, it is important to arrange for long-term follow-through to decrease the chances of future relapse. In the meantime, it's important for the organizers to integrate strategies into their work that make the process more sustainable for them. For example, when was the last time the group hung out together and didn't talk about the aggressor, rape, or rape culture, but just had fun? Weave celebration and fun into your community; it is also a reflection of the world we want to build.

Also, the change that the organizing group is making is not just the transformation of the particular aggressor, but also the transformation of our culture. If the aggressor's friends and family disparage the group, it doesn't mean that the group is doing anything wrong; it's just a manifestation of the larger problem of rape culture. Every group of people that is working to build a community accountability process must understand that they are not working in isolation, but in the company of an *ongoing* vast and rich global movement for liberation.

These principles are merely bones to be used as a framework for a complex, three-dimensional accountability process. Each community is responsible for add-

ing its own distinctive features to make the body of the accountability process its own. What follows is a description of three very different scenarios of community groups struggling with sexual violence and mapping out an accountability plan. These accountability scenarios occurred before the folks at CARA crafted the principles listed above, but they were important experiences that gave us the tools we needed to identify important components of accountability work.

#### Scenario One

Dan is a Black man in an urban area who is active in the movement to end racial profiling and police brutality.<sup>7</sup> He is also works with young people to organize against institutional racism at an organization called Youth Empowered. He is well-known by progressives and people of color in the area and popular in the community. Over the course of three years, four young Black women (ages twenty-one and younger) who were being mentored by Dan approached CARA staff with concerns about ongoing sexual harassment within their activist community. Sexual harassment tactics reported by the young women included Dan bringing young people that he mentored to strip clubs, approaching intoxicated young women who he mentored to have sex with them, and having conversations in the organizing space about the size of women's genitals as it relates to their ethnicity. The young women also asserted that institutional sexism within the space was a serious problem at Youth Empowered. Young women had fewer leadership opportunities and their ideas were dismissed.

Organizers at CARA met with Dan in an effort to share with him our concerns and begin an accountability process, but he was resistant. Women of color who were Dan's friends, who did not want to believe that Dan was capable of this behavior, chose to protect Dan from being confronted. Instead, several young women were surprised by an unscheduled meeting within Youth Empowered, facilitated by an older woman of color, where they were bullied into "squashing" their concerns about Dan. They were accused of spreading lies and told that they should be grateful for the organizing opportunities afforded to them by Dan. In one of these meetings, a young woman was shown a letter from the police department that criticized Dan about organizing a rally in an attempt to make her critique of Dan's behavior seem divisive to the movement against police brutality. After these meetings, each young woman felt completely demoralized and severed all ties with Youth Empowered.

Black activists have struggled with the tension of patriarchy within our social justice movements since the movement to abolish slavery. Women who identify the problem and try to organize against sexism and sexual violence within our movements are often labeled as divisive, and even as FBI informants. Their work is discredited and they are often traumatized by the experience. As a result, they often do not want to engage in an accountability process, especially when they are not getting support from people they thought were their comrades, including other women of color.

Over the first two years, CARA made several attempts to hold Dan accountable and each effort was a struggle. An attempt to connect with women of color who organized with him only strained the relationship between our organizations.

We also realized that our staff members were not on the same page with each other about how to support young women who were aggravated with one organization discussing the problem at our organization. How did that impact our ability to build strategic coalitions with Youth Empowered? How were we going to support the young women to tell their truth without the story descending into a feeling of hopelessness? Was this a problem about Dan or was this a problem with the organizational culture within Youth Empowered?

We realized that it was not enough to recognize Dan's behavior as problematic and try to appeal to the consciences of the people around him. We needed a thoughtful plan supported by everyone in our organization and we needed to identify folks within CARA who would take the necessary leadership to map out the plan for all of us. We decided that the women of color would meet separately from the general CARA membership to develop an analysis and strategy and the rest of CARA would follow their lead. The women of color decided that our struggle with Dan and his behavior had also become an organizational issue for CARA—it was not solely a community issue—and we identified it as such. We named Dan as a person who had ongoing chronic issues with sexual harassment. Surprisingly, this intentional defining of the problem had not yet happened among our staff. We had talked about his behavior as problematic, unaccountable, and manipulative, but we had not collectively and specifically named it as a form of sexualized violence.

Importantly, we decided that our analysis of his behavior was not secret information. If people in the community asked us our opinion about Dan or disclosed that they were being sexually harassed at Youth Empowered, we decided that our analysis would not be confidential, but would be shared in the spirit of sharing information about destructive behavior. In the past, we struggled with whether or not sharing this information would be useless or counterproductive gossip. We knew the risk of telling others that a well-known Black man who organized against police violence was responsible for sexualized violence. But we decided that it was safer for our community for us to not allow ourselves to be silenced. It was also safer for Dan if we supported our community to move along in its process of struggling with his behavior and eventually demanding accountability. If our community didn't hold him accountable and compel him to reform his behavior, we worried that he would step over the line with a woman who would not hesitate to report him to the police, which would give the police the ammunition they needed to completely discredit Dan, as well as our movement against police violence. Therefore, we made a decision to tell people the information if they came to us with concerns.

We decided that instead of meeting with all the women of color in Dan's ranks, we would choose one Black woman from CARA to invite one Black woman from Youth Empowered to have a solid, low-drama conversation. We also asked another Black woman familiar and friendly with both groups and strong in her analysis of sexual violence within Black communities to facilitate the conversation. The woman from Youth Empowered had positive experiences organizing with CARA in the past and, though our earlier conversations about Dan were fraught with tension and defensiveness on all our parts, she was willing to connect



with us. The participation of the third woman as a friendly facilitator also helped our representative to be more relaxed in our conversation.

The first meetings with these women went very well. The CARA representative was clear that the organization's analysis was that Dan had a serious problem with sexual harassment, and we were specifically concerned about the fact that he was working with young people. We were specifically concerned about Dan's engagement with young people because of the power Dan had in choosing which young person would get internships, go to out-of-town conferences, or receive leadership opportunities. Dan's friend received the information with very little defensiveness and was eager to have more conversations about Dan's behavior. This one-on-one strategy seemed to relax the tension between the two progressive organizations; instead we became three sisters intentionally unpacking the problem of misogyny in our community.

The outcome of these meetings was the healing of the strategic relationship between our organizations, which was important for movement-building, but we still had not moved to a place where we could hold Dan accountable. We struggled with the specific thing we wanted to see happen. The women whom he'd sexually harassed were not asking for anything in particular; they understandably just wanted to be left alone. We decided that we did not want him ejected from the activist community, but that it was not safe for him to mentor young people.

It was at this time that a seventeen-year-old Black woman, Keisha, connected with us through Rashad, a seventeen-year-old Black man who was organizing both with CARA and with Youth Empowered. (Rashad was referred to CARA through Dan's organization because the rift between the two groups had significantly healed. If we had not accomplished this, Keisha may not have found CARA.) Keisha was an intern at Youth Empowered and had written a four-page letter of resignation that detailed Dan's sexist behavior. The women at CARA listened to Keisha's story, read her letter, and decided to share with her our collective analysis of Dan's behavior. Because Dan is so deeply supported at Youth Empowered, CARA's response helped her feel affirmed and validated. CARA's organizers helped Keisha strategize about sharing the letter at Youth Empowered by asking her what she wanted to achieve, how she wanted to be supported, and what she wanted her next steps to be after the meeting.

Keisha read her letter aloud to Youth Empowered members that night, with Rashad acting as her ally. She received some support from some women in the community, but she was also told that her letter was very "high school" and immature, by a Black woman within the organization who was also a mentor. Dan pulled Rashad aside after Keisha read her letter and told him that he was making a mistake by organizing with CARA because "those women hate Black men." It was a very painful event, and yet both Keisha and Rashad felt positive about the fact that they followed through with their plan and publicly revealed the same problems that other young Black women before Keisha had named but privately struggled with.

The Black woman from Youth Empowered who had been engaging with CARA was stunned by Keisha's letter, and quickly organized a meeting with Dan, Keisha, Rashad, her CARA contact, and other Youth Empowered orga-

nizers, along with the same Black woman facilitator. Keisha and CARA organizers prepared for tactics that Dan and his supporters would use to discredit Keisha. Though each organizer admitted that there was a problem with institutional sexism within Youth Empowered, they belittled the conflict, as if it were a misunderstanding between Keisha and Dan. They said she was "acting white" for putting her thoughts on paper and for wanting to resign her internship. Keisha, being the youngest person at the meeting, was mostly intimidated and silenced by these hurtful tactics. The CARA organizer who was there, however, carefully challenged each attempt to discredit Keisha. We continued to support Keisha during and after this meeting.

Keisha's letter, however, had a strong ripple effect that continued to impact Youth Empowered. The Youth Empowered organizer who had been talking with CARA was moved by Keisha's letter, and committed to figuring out an accountability plan for Dan that made sense for her organization. She began to organize discussions to clarify the issues that included organizers from CARA, Dan, and organizers from Youth Empowered. These conversations were very different than when we had started. We no longer had to convince folks that institutional sexism existed in the organization, or that Dan's behavior was a form of sexualized violence. Dan eventually resigned from his mentorship position at the organization, but it's not known if this was because of the pressure created by Keisha's letter and CARA's stronger connections with women of color at Youth Empowered. With his absence, the new leadership at Youth Empowered began to more confidently address the institutional sexism issues within the organization.

Although we think that this work has created a safer environment at Youth Empowered, Dan still has not been accountable for his behavior. That is to say, he has not admitted that what he did was wrong or taken steps to reconcile with the people who he targeted at Youth Empowered. However, at the time of writing, we expect that he'll continue to go to these meetings where these conversations about sexual violence (including his own) will be discussed in the context of building a liberation movement for all Black people.

### Working the Principles

In the above scenario, CARA organizers utilized many of the community accountability principles discussed above. We were sure to respect the autonomy of the young women. They needed distance from the situation, so we did not pressure them to participate in the often-grueling process. However, we did regularly update them on our progress, keeping the door open if they changed their minds about what they wanted their role to be. In the meantime, we set up support systems for them, making sure we made space for Black women to just relax and talk about our lives instead of spending all of our time processing Dan.

Because the issue was complicated, we planned together as a group, running strategies by one another so that many perspectives and ideas could help improve our work. We also learned from our mistakes and learned to consider more carefully the consequences of strategies such as calling a big meeting rather than working with individuals. Also, working with the Black woman from Youth Empowered, a friend and comrade of Dan's, was really critical in bringing Dan

closer to the possibility of accountability. Her participation brought important credibility to the questions we were asking.

However, the most important principle that we exercised in this process was taking a step back and making sure we were all on the same page with our analysis of what we were dealing with. Our frustration with Dan was a little sloppy at first—we weren't sure what the problem was. For example, there was a question about whether or not he raped someone, but we had not spoken to this person directly and, therefore, had no real reason to think this was true other than the fact that he was exhibiting other problematic behavior. We had to decide that the behavior that we were sure about was enough for which to demand accountability. The power of naming the problem cannot be underestimated in this particular scenario. Because the behavior was not intensely violent, such as sexual assault, we were searching for the right to name it as sexualized violence. Sexual harassment often presents this problem. There is no assault, but there are elusive and destructive forms of violence at play including power manipulation, verbal misogynist remarks, and the humiliation of young people. Once we reached consensus in our analysis, we were prepared to receive the opportunity that Keisha's letter and work offered and use it to push the accountability process further along.

#### Scenario Two

Kevin is a member of the alternative punk music community in an urban area. His community is predominantly young, white, multigendered, and includes a significant number of queer folks. Kevin and his close-knit community, which includes his band and their friends, were told by two women that they had been sexually assaulted at recent parties. The aggressor, Lou, was active and well-known in the music community, and he was employed at a popular club. Lou encouraged the women to get drunk and then forced them to have sex against their will.

One of the survivors and her friends did a brief intervention with Lou, confronting him in person with the information. She reports that at first he was humbled and apologetic; but, after leaving them, reversed his behavior and began to justify his actions.

Frustrated with Lou's lack of accountability and with sexual violence in the music community in general, Kevin's group began to meet and discuss the situation. They not only reflected on the survivors' experiences, but also how the local culture supported bad behavior. For example, they discussed how a local weekly newspaper, popular in the alternative music community, glamorized the massive amount of drinking that was always prevalent at Lou's parties. Kevin's group decided that there was a real lack of consciousness about the issue of sexual violence and the community needed to be woken up. To that end, they designed flyers that announced Lou's behavior and his identity, asserted the need for Lou's accountability as directed by the survivors, included a critique of the newspaper, and suggested boycotting Lou's club. With the survivors' consent, the group then passed the flyers out at places where members of their community usually congregated.

A couple of weeks later, the newspaper published an article defending Lou by implying that, since the women that he allegedly assaulted had not pressed

criminal charges, the allegations could not be that credible. Kevin's group realized that they needed to do a lot of reeducation about sexual violence within the music community. At the same time, they were being pressured by Lou with threats to sue for libel. The group had not planned for this possible outcome, but instead of backing off, they re-grouped and used anonymous e-mails and the Internet to protect their identities.<sup>1</sup>

They proceeded to write a powerful document that shared the survivors' experiences (written by the survivors), defined sexual violence, and addressed issues of consent and victim-blaming. Using a mixture of statistics and analysis, they challenged the criminal legal system as an effective source for justice, thereby undermining the newspaper's absurd assertion that sexual violence can only be taken seriously if the survivor reports it to the police. Most importantly, the group clearly articulated what they meant by community accountability. With permission, we have reprinted their definition of accountability below:

We expect that the sexual perpetrator be held accountable for their actions and prevented from shifting blame onto the survivor. We expect that the perpetrator own their assaultive behavior and understand the full ramifications their actions have and will continue to have on the survivor and the community. The perpetrator must illustrate their compliance by making a public apology and, with the help of their peers, seek counseling from a sexual assault specialist. It is equally important that they inform future partners and friends that they have a problem and ask for their support in the healing process. If the perpetrator moves to a new community, they must continue to comply with the community guidelines set forth above. We believe that by working with the perpetrator in the healing process, we can truly succeed in making our community safer.<sup>2</sup>

They released their full statement to the press and also posted it to a Web site. The statement had an important impact. A reporter from the popular weekly newspaper contacted them and admitted that the statement compelled her to rethink some of her ideas about sexual violence. It also kindled a conversation in the larger music community about sexual violence and accountability.

Other than making threats of a lawsuit to the group, Lou mostly ignored the group until the boycott of the club where he worked started to gain steam. Soon, bands from out of town also began to avoid playing at the club. This pressure compelled Lou to engage in a series of e-mail discussions with Kevin with the goal of negotiating a face-to-face meeting. Engaging through e-mail was a difficult and frustrating process. Lou was consistently defensive and wanted "mediation." Kevin was clear about his group's analysis and goals and wanted accountability. Eventually, they gave up on setting a meeting because they couldn't agree on terms.

Throughout this process, Kevin's group experienced a great deal of exhaustion and frustration. During the periodic meetings that CARA staff had with Kevin for support and advice, he often expressed feeling really tired of the need.

ect of engaging with Lou at all. Slowly, Kevin and his group switched tactics and focused more on community-building, education, and prevention. It's a critical shift to decide to use your resources to build the community you want rather than expend all of your resources by fighting the problem you want to eliminate. They began a process of learning more about sexual violence, safety, and accountability. They hosted benefits for CARA and other anti-violence organizations. They prepared themselves to facilitate their own safety and accountability workshops. They did all of this with the faith that they could transform their music community to reach a set of values that were consistent with being fun, sexy, and liberatory and explicitly anti-rape and anti-oppression.

#### Working the Principles

Similar to the first scenario, this community engaged in some trial and error and learned a lot about different strategies. They were careful to check in with survivors about each of their strategies. It's important to note that one survivor changed her role as the process continued. At first, she was the main person who drove the initial confrontation with Lou. As the group pressured Lou more indirectly, she chose to stay on the sideline. The group did a good job of being flexible with her shifting role.

The fact that the group worked collectively was also very critical. We had the impression that sometimes their work was more collectively driven and sometimes only one or two people were the main organizers. When only one or two people were doing the work, it was clear that the process lost some sustainability. However, we must also reflect a lot of compassion on the reality that some folks who initially began to organize realized down the line that they needed stronger boundaries between themselves and the process. In terms of planning, it may be helpful to do ongoing self-checks to note how the work may be triggering one's own experience of surviving violence or to determine if one just generally has a low capacity for doing this kind of accountability work. Perhaps the type of strategy is not a good match for the culture of the group. As this group moved into a different direction that focused more on raising consciousness and building stronger community connections, we noticed a significant revival in the energy of the organizers.

Finally, we think that the most important principle that made a difference in this community's work was when they presented a critical analysis of sexual violence and rape culture to the larger community of rock musicians and alternative artists. It seemed important to sap the arrogance of the newspaper's uncritical defense of Lou, given how much influence the newspaper has within the target community. We also think that creating and sharing the statement was important in light of the group's flyering strategy. There's very little one can say on a flyer and sexual violence can be very complicated. Their statement did a great job of demonstrating the full dimension of sexual violence by weaving in the survivors' voices in their own words, using statistical information to show why people do not believe survivors, and presenting a liberatory vision of accountability and justice.

Some members of the community may regret that they were ultimately unable to compel Lou to follow their demands. However, CARA feels that it's not unrea-

sonable to think that their work did have a significant impact on Lou. After experiencing the full force of collective organizing which asserted that his behavior was unacceptable, we venture to guess that Lou might be less likely to act in manipulative and abusive ways. In any case, we think their work may have also compelled other members of the community to think critically about the way in which consent operates in their sexual encounters, which is important work in preventing future sexual violence. Also, it's important to remember that this community did, in fact, stay with their accountability process for the long haul—they now simply have their sights set higher than Lou.

#### Scenario Three

Marisol is a young, radical Chicana activist who organizes with CARA as well as the local chapter of a national Chicano activist group, Unido. While attending an overnight, out-of-town conference with Unido, a young man, Juan, sexually assaulted her. When she returned home, she shared her experience with organizers at CARA. She told us how hurt and confused she felt as a result of the assault, especially since it happened in the context of organizing at Unido. The organizers validated her feelings and supported her to engage in a healing process. We then began to talk with her more about Unido to get a better grasp on the culture of the organization as a whole and if they had the tools to address sexual violence as a problem in their community.

Marisol realized that she needed to discuss the problem with other young women at Unido. Through conversations with them, she learned that Juan had an ongoing pattern of sexually assaulting other young women organizing with Unido. She found three other women who had had similar experiences with the same activist. This information led Marisol to organize an emergency meeting with the women of Unido to discuss the problem. At this meeting, she learned that this behavior had been happening for years and women before her had tried to address it and had demanded that Juan be ejected from the position of power he possessed within the organization. However, though Unido's leadership had talked to Juan about his behavior, there was no real follow-up and there were no consequences.

The young Chicanas of Unido decided to devise a plan to confront the organization's largely male leadership about the problem of sexual violence in general, and Juan's behavior specifically. Identifying the criminal justice system as a real problem in their community, they did not want to pursue law enforcement-based responses. Also, Marisol did not want the episode to end with Unido simply isolating the aggressor without resolving Juan's abusive behavior. The young women decided on a plan that included demanding that Juan step down from leadership positions in Unido, that he pursue counseling and that his friends support him to go to appropriate counseling, and that Unido pursue intensive educational work on sexual violence.

The women's collective strength and demands were so powerful that Unido's leadership agreed to remove Juan from the organization's ranks and to sponsor trainings on sexual violence—not just within Unido's local Seattle chapter but to prioritize the issue throughout Unido's national agenda. The workshop curricu-



lum focused on the connection between liberation for Mexicans and Chicanos and the work of ending sexual violence.

Also, because of the help of his friends and community, Juan was supported to go to culturally specific counseling addressing power and control issues, particularly for aggressors of sexual violence. Marisol also worked to build a strong community of support for herself and other survivors within Unido. Eventually she decided it was better for her health to create a boundary between herself and this particular chapter of Unido, but, after a year's break, she is organizing with another chapter of Unido. There, she is incorporating a consciousness of sexual violence and misogyny into the local chapter's political agenda.

#### Working the Principles

Compared to the other two scenarios, this scenario had a pretty short timeline. While the first scenario has taken over two years (so far), the second scenario has been happening for a little over a year, and the third lasted for a mere two months. One reason is the ease with which a strong accountability process can be facilitated when the community is a specific group of people rather than an unstructured and informal group. If there is a system of accountability within the community that is already set up, organizers can maximize that tool to facilitate an accountability process for sexual violence.

Interestingly, organizers at Unido previously attempted to hold the aggressor accountable using the same means, but their demands were not taken seriously. We think the attempt led by Marisol was more successful for two reasons. First, survivors were backed up by a collective of people instead of just a few folks. This lent credibility and power to the group of organizers as they approached Unido's leadership. Second, the organizers were clearer about what they wanted to see happen with Juan, as well as with Unido. Instead of a vague call for accountability, the women asserted specific steps that they wanted Juan and Unido to take. This clarity helped pressure Unido to meet the challenge by complying with the specific demands that the women called for.

Also, the fact that Juan's friends agreed to support him to attend counseling was a great success. Support from friends and family is perhaps one of the most effective ways to ensure that aggressors attend counseling, if that is the goal. They can be more compassionate because they love the person, they are more integrated in the person's life, and they have more credibility with the person. Support from the aggressor's friends and family can be a precious resource in securing an aggressor's follow through with an accountability process.

#### A Note on Credibility

We hope that the above scenarios reveal the "jazziness" often needed for a community to negotiate itself through a complex process that has multiple components. (We've borrowed the concept of jazziness from Cornel West, who describes it as a reliance on "simultaneous improvisation and structure," as well as communal accountability.) While organizers should be committed to some fundamental political principles (womanism/feminism, antiracism, and pro-queer), and can build on the organizing principles we have listed above, the context of any situa-

tion will likely be complex, therefore organizers must also be flexible enough to modify and improve tactics as the process unfolds.

To underscore the need for jazziness, we want to briefly explore a problem that comes up frequently in community accountability work: How do the community and the organizers think about the *credibility* of survivors and of aggressors? Because of oppression, people of color, women, young people, queer people, and people with disabilities are often not believed when telling their stories of being violated and exploited. In our first scenario, for example, one of the Black women who experienced sexual harassment wasn't believed because of the racialized and gendered stereotypes of Black women as promiscuous. For this reason, the wider feminist antiviolence community has a principle of always believing women if they report being sexually violated.

CARA also leans in this direction, but we do not do so uncritically. We try to develop a process of engagement with a person's story of being violated, rather than thinking of the process as a fact-finding mission with an end goal of determining the Objective Truth of What Really Happened. It is almost impossible to prove a sexual assault happened—and when it is possible, it is incredibly time- and resource-consuming. The reality is that a perfectly accurate account of an incident of sexual violence is difficult to attain. Though everyone has an obligation to recount their experience as accurately as they can, sometimes survivors do not get every detail right or their story may be inconsistent. That's understandable—the experience of sexual violence can be extremely traumatic, and trauma can impact a person's memory and perception. Furthermore, the person's age or disability may impact their capacity to convey their story with perfect accuracy. This does not necessarily undermine their credibility. Sometimes aggressors can have what seems to be a very polished account of what happened. That does not necessarily mean that they ought to be believed.<sup>18</sup>

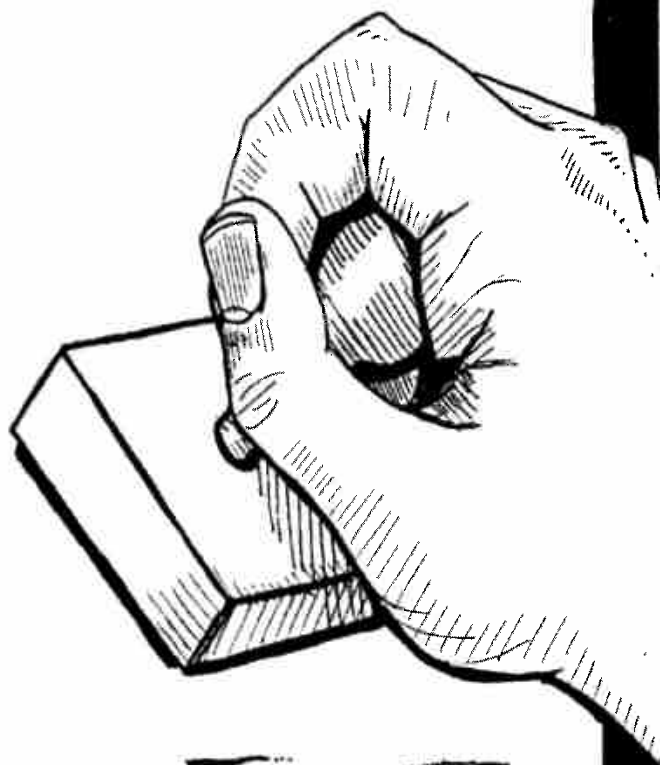
As a strategy to step around this problem of credibility, we implement a method that demands an intentional engagement of organizers with the people and the context of the situation. Organizers are not objective, coolly detached receivers of a report; rather, they are helping to build and create the way to think about what happened and what should happen next.

Critically engaging an account of sexual assault means actively considering it in multiple contexts. For example, we come to this work with an understanding that we live in a culture in which sexual violence is, sadly, a regular occurrence. We consider how institutional oppression informs people's choices within the situations in question. We look at people's patterns of behavior. We think about other information that we know about the community in which the violence happened that may be helpful. Because we understand that we are also not objective, we reflect on how our own biases might be informing the way in which we perceive information, and whether this is helpful or not. We help each other think critically around hard corners of the story so that our analysis doesn't become narrow or develop in isolation. In short, we critically engage the story to come up with our best assessment of its most important elements, and then develop a plan to address the situation based on solid political values and organizing principles.

### Conclusion

Given the intensity of addressing sexual violence in a community, naming an aggressor will almost necessarily cause some community upheaval and hurt. We urge people organizing for community accountability to be prepared for the risks involved in leading a community accountability process. This work will be hard and messy, but it is also work that is vital, deeply liberatory, meaningful, and geared toward movement building. Engaging with communities to do this work helps to reconnect people to one another, potentially strengthening our relationships and making our communities more resilient and prepared for other political work. Instead of depending on institutions to support us—institutions that will often respond oppressively if they respond at all—community accountability work helps us to develop a practice of liberation in our personal lives, our community lives, and our political lives. Revolutionary movement-building will only happen if we can build the systems and practices that affirm our liberation-based values of connection, agency, respect, self-determination, and justice. Community accountability work provides us with a critical opportunity to transform our relationships and communities to reflect these liberatory values.





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