transforming communities: community-based responses to partner abuse

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"I'm an activist against the prison system because as the prison system works now, I've seen so many great ideas, lives, and spirits just completely squashed by the bureaucracy, and by the total abuse and dehumanization that goes on within these walls. It's time we learn to stand up," said Misty Rojo on Justice Now's 2005 CD, *The We That Sets Us Free: Building a World Without Prisons*.

Like so many people in prison, Rojo is a survivor of both interpersonal violence–in her case, over 10 years of partner abuse–and the state violence of policing and imprisonment. Her call invites us to create ways of living without throwing people behind prison walls: What would it mean for us to hold each other accountable for the harms we do without calling the cops? How do we transform our lives so this harm no longer happens? Can we even imagine it?

As a queer first-generation Chinese-American anti-prison organizer, I grew up not always being able to communicate with my parents or relatives about my work: how do I explain prison abolition, community-based accountability, or transformative justice in Chinese? Who should and can I be out with, as queer and as a survivor?

I wrote an earlier version of this article in 2004 for *ColorLines* Magazine (www.colorlines.com). Sharing the article with my mother was simultaneously a building moment and a reminder that even when communicating in the same language, in this case English, we know different words and have varying comfort levels in using them, and I was communicating in language and stated intentions commonly shared by activist-identified communities.

Over time, I've realized that even if in 2004 I found barriers sharing this work with my mother, this conversation about the need to vision beyond bars takes place everywhere we are building and practicing *familia*. Now, when my mother and I are out to dinner with family friends who ask about my work challenging imprisonment and ask, "Don't we need more prisons so people aren't so crowded?" and my mother responds that it doesn't address the root of the problem, I'm no longer surprised. Nor was I surprised that when her friend was splitting with her partner and sought a restraining order because he refused to move out, my mother, while providing emotional support throughout the process, opted out of attending the strategy meeting about the restraining order.

So when people ask how my sister and I both turned out the way we did–whether or not we came from "activist parents," the answer is a "no, but…": But my mother is one of the fiercest and loving people I know. She's survived childhood, the experience of immigrating from Taipei to the Midwest in the 70s, and almost single-handedly raising my sister and I. Growing up, I've watched her nurture loved ones, young and old, while taking people to task for the harm they do, like in my elementary school classroom where my teacher wanted us to learn to file taxes and this Asian boy who wrote down my name on his tax form as his "wife" would intrude my personal space in class.

My mother's fierce loving, coupled with my father's decision to pursue his life's passion as an urban designer back in Taiwan and China while my mother raised my sister and I here in the States, deeply shaped an uncompromising commitment to the boldest of visions in my political work. Over time,

my understanding of my childhood also has shown me that in many ways, the hardest work begins at home, and that accountability to people in our daily lives is integral to being accountable to the work of transformation.

Building the Movement

Those of us targeted by policing and imprisonment—communities of color, immigrant, poor and working-class, queer and trans, and disability communities—have long had reason to not turn to these systems for support around the violence and harm we face, and to instead create our own interventions.

This need has become all the more urgent with the increased surveillance and policing after 9/11. In Atlanta, Georgia, the South Asian anti family violence organization Raksha launched Breaking the Silence after the PATRIOT Act and increased deportations targeting the immigrant and refugee communities. "We have to think about the impact law enforcement has had in our communities," said Priyanka Sinha, community education director at Raksha. "People don't feel safe; our families have been broken up."

In recent memory, our movements have amplified our collective analysis and articulation of this need, answering Angela Davis' call on *The We That Sets Us Free* to "begin to think about the state as a perpetrator of violence against women, and understand the connections between intimate violence, private violence, state violence, prison violence, and military violence." Since organizers working with the prison abolition organization Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence collaborated five years or so ago to write the joint statement, "Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex," the prison abolition and prisoner rights' movements have amplified our analysis of how gender oppression and state violence intersect, and seen a proliferation of organizing with and advocacy for people in women's prisons and a marked growth in this work with trans and gender variant people in men's and women's prisons. We've taken seriously the task of engaging in dialogue and work with the anti-violence movements to end interpersonal violence.

And radical and progressive networks within the anti-domestic and sexual violence movements today commonly acknowledge the ways in which pushing for legislation criminalizing "violence against women"—while effectively contributing to public understanding of this violence as harm that demands accountability—has helped to expand the harmful reach of the policing and imprisonment on our communities. We actively are organizing ourselves towards non-policing, non-prison responses to partner abuse and other forms of interpersonal violence:

Generation Five (G5), a San-Francisco-based project that works to end child sexual abuse, has worked to build our movements' understanding of "transformative justice" responses to interpersonal violence, premised on the understanding that our work is not only about intervention in individual incidences of harm, but also about transforming "the conditions of oppression and domination that allow that violence to happen" in the first place. G5 trains communities to support transformative justice approaches to child sexual abuse. One participant, a psychologist in a children's agency, contacted the survivor's extended family to create a plan to support the child, hold the aggressor accountable and support the aggressor's process. Afterwards, she called CPS to report what happened, since child psychologists are "mandated reporters"–but also pitched the plan she and the community had created. CPS found it acceptable and stayed out; so did the criminal legal system.

novative, Community-Based Responses to Anti-LGBT Violence," in which they wrote, "Violence against LGBT people and other targeted groups is an explosive symptom of already shattered social, economic, cultural, and religious relationships in our communities, and of the fear, rage, and resentment that is the result of those shattered relationships. The problem isn't 'out there,' located only in the beliefs and actions of the pathological few; it exists much closer to home." ▮

Sara Kershnar, G5's director, said of the last several years that "what we've been able to do put child sexual abuse, intimate and community violence more on the map as a political project" and to articulate their vision for transformative justice. Most recently, G5 distributed its document, "Towards Transformative Justice: A Liberatory Approach to Child Sexual Abuse" at the United States Social Forum. A call for people to engage in developing transformative justice responses to violence, the document offers several principles in developing transformative justice responses; these include a commitment to liberation amongst those involved; shifting power relations; developing safety; seeking accountability; building collective action; honoring where we all come from; and making the process sustainable. Sara said G5's goal over the next several years is to "find the right partners with clear politics, clear principles, and clear practices" to help create models, develop skills, and facilitate strategic thinking.

Over the past several years, Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA) in Seattle has actively supported people and networks in developing community accountability strategies. In one situation, CARA supported a group of young women organizers who had been sexually assaulted by a male co-organizer. Because of the women's demands, the group removed him from his position and he entered counseling with support from friends. The group also began sponsoring trainings on sexual violence throughout its national chapters.

Drawing from this work, CARA for the past few years has been developing "Taking Risks: Implementing Grassroots Community Accountability Strategies," which they contributed to the 2006 INCITE! Color of Violence Anthology. In this document, CARA shares a number of principles as a resource for people to consider in organizing community accountability strategies: recognizing the humanity of everyone involved; prioritize the self-determination of the survivor; identify a simultaneous plan for safety and support for the survivor and community members; carefully consider the potential consequences of the strategy; organize collectively; make sure everyone involved in the group seeking accountability shares a political analysis of sexual violence; be clear and specific about what you want from the aggressor in terms of accountability; let the aggressor know your analysis and demands; consider help from the aggressor's community; and prepare to be engaged in the process for the long haul.

And Mimi Kim, who has worked to end domestic violence and sexual assault for over 15 years, launched Creative Interventions in 2004 to create space for "the people closest to and most impacted by violence to envision and create ways to make it stop" and to collect and analyze stories stories of responses to harm that don't rely on the criminal legal system. Since 2004, Kim said, "the projects and vision remain remarkably similar, though we're still on the frontiers of what this all means in 2007. In a lot of ways, we are building a long, long history of everyday people trying to end violence in ways that don't play into oppressive structures." Simultaneously, Kim said the work has been about explicitly naming leadership in women and trans folks, people of color, queer folks, poor folks, and people with disabilities and creating collective leadership.

"The point of opening up and creating these alternatives," Kim reflects, "means creating a world that is very different from this one. If kids grow up seeing that abuse gets stopped by someone right next to them, if we create subsystems where people know that if they're violent, it's not going to be tolerated–we're going to create a whole different

way of living in this world."

Practicing Community

"We need to shift toward an underlying culture of partnership and trust and away from a culture of domination," said Jane Dorotik, currently imprisoned at California Institution for Women, on *The We That Sets Us Free*. Domination underlies every single relationship, from relationships between parents and children, between governments and citizens, us and nature. In contrast, a partnership-, trust-oriented model supports mutually respectful, caring relationships. There can be hierarchies as would be necessary in all social structure, but power would be used not to constrict and control, but to elicit from ourselves and others our highest potential." While our communities have made movement since 2004 towards community accountability strategies, this is hard work and we have a long ways to go–especially when we don't tend to have many support systems for the kind of accountable relationships Dorotik is calling for.

"The notion of accountable communities is both parallel to and contrasting from, a precursor to community accountability," said Connie Burke of the Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse in Seattle. Since we aren't generally skilled at being accountable to each other, and this is something that perpetuates patterns of abuse, she explained, the Network sees its work as "creating the conditions necessary to create loving and equitable relationships" as a building block towards accountable communities.

And rather than continue to single out people who harm as a distinct group, the Network has collaborated with survivors to develop relationship skills classes for anyone interested in building the skills to engage in the process of accountability. Burke explained that "when something dramatic and traumatic happens, if we haven't practiced, we don't just all rise to the occasion. We tend to do what we've always done."

Another project the Network has developed is Friends Are Reaching Out (FAR OUT), which supports survivors in breaking isolation and reconnecting with friends and family and to ask for the kinds of support they need. The project also supports people's networks to come together when there isn't imminent harm on the table to come to agreements on ways of approaching problems for when they arise. "We moved from there to people in more dangerous situations," said Burke.

The Network also has supported identity-based networks in constructing accountable communities. For instance, the community Seattle has supported femmes in constructing positive femme culture, art, and writing spaces that are "anti-racist and class-aware"–not constructed in ways that exploit other women's work. Similarly, the Network has sponsored a project called Intentional Masculinities to support trans men, masculine-identified women, people on the FTM spectrum, and some queer non-trans men in constructing accountable, "pro-feminist… loving, kind, strong, and hot" masculinities.

Transforming Justice

While we've seen some movement towards community-based responses to harms we face within our homes and networks, we have a lot more learning and growing to do. As we continue this work, it's important that we continue to make the connections among "intimate violence, private violence, state violence, prison violence, and military violence," as Angela Davis calls for on *The We That Sets Us Free*, and to make new connections with other forms of violence, like hate violence, as well. This is one area we

also have much learning and growth to do in terms of responding to harms directed at us from outside of our immediate networks: How do we hold people accountable for the harm they do when we don't have interpersonal relationships?

In this moment, we have few, if any options for responses to racist, sexist, queerphobic and/or transphobic violence from people we don't know. But in a political moment where liberals and moderates are beginning to locate hate violence on their radar, and engage with the state in responding, it's critical that we examine our choice in language, strategy, and its impacts on our communities and the work of transformation.

For instance, from the well- and less-publicized cases of Vincent Chin to Gwen Araujo and Sakia Gunn to the more recent Jersey Four–all survivors and victims of hate violence–what's the impact when commentators, organizers, and/or cultural workers lead with the language of "hate crimes"? Defining hate violence as a crime, thus criminalizing it, enables people to be convicted of the crime and thrown into prison. We can ask similar questions of ourselves about this response as we do now of the impact of criminalizing domestic violence: What was the impact of pushing for a criminal legal response to this form of partner abuse? Did sending partners to prison, an environment and structure rooted in abuse, exploitation, and misogyny fostered by the state, make sense as a strategy to stop patterns of abuse and exploitation at home? We now know that this approach didn't work, and that it did play a role in growing the use and justification for policing and imprisonment and expanding their harmful impact on our communities. Similarly, what is the impact of efforts to enact "hate crime" legislation and other policy efforts to limit the use of the "gay panic defense"? While such defenses are clearly absurd, efforts to limit their use ultimately are about being able to criminalize people. And when we're facing the challenge of ending hate violence, does it make sense to respond to hate violence by calling for people to be sent into an institution that plays such an integral role in maintaining and strengthening white supremacy, the gender binary, and heteronormativity?

When the only response put before us is to look for "justice" via the criminal legal system, when the enormity of what we're facing seems as insurmountable as they do, it's extremely hard to imagine another way. But tapping into our collective courage to dare to dream the world we want to live in is our fundamental task in the work of transformation. It's organizing against imprisonment with people in women's prisons and formerly imprisoned trans women–many of whom are survivors of violence at the hands of the state, and at home and/or on the streets prior to their imprisonment, many of whom are queer and/or trans people of color–that's shown me more and more each day that investing any more of our collective "ideas, lives, and spirits" into the criminal legal system is futile–they will only continue to be "squashed by the bureaucracy and…total abuse and dehumanization," as Misty Rojo said on *The We That Sets Us Free*. "It's time we learned to stand up."

While we have a long ways to go, people have begun to take leadership. In 2005, members of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), INCITE!, Justice Now, the Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project (TGJIP), and others convened and participated in a conversation about community-based responses to harm at Creating Change. Our intent was to push ourselves and the broader LGBT movement to be accountable to all parts of our queer and trans networks, including folks directly impacted by intersecting forms of violence. And the AFSC published and distributed the pamphlet "Close to Home: Developing In-