

Where abolition meets action: women organizing against gender violence

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The last decade has seen a growing movement toward abolishing prisons. At the same time, antiviolence organizers have called on prison abolitionists to take the issue of gender violence seriously and to develop initiatives to address it in the context of prison abolition. Fueled by increasing recognition that women of color, immigrant, queer, transgender, poor, and other marginalized women are often further brutalized – rather than protected – by the police, grassroots groups, and activists throughout the world, are organizing community alternatives to calling 911. Such initiatives, however, are not new. Throughout history, women have acted and organized to ensure their own and their loved ones' safety. This article examines both past and present models of women's community self-defense practices against interpersonal violence. By exploring methods women have employed to protect themselves, their loved ones, and communities, this article seeks to contribute to the current conversations on how to promote safety and accountability without resorting to state-based policing and prisons.

Keywords: feminism; gender violence; alternatives to prison; collective action; community

During the last decade, the growing movement toward prison abolition, coupled with mounting recognition of the need for community responses to gender violence, has led to increased interest in developing alternatives to government policing. Moving away from the notion of women as victims in need of police protection, grassroots groups, and activists are organizing community alternatives to calling 911. Such initiatives, however, are not new. Throughout the twentieth century, women have organized alternative models of self-protection.

This piece examines past and present models of women's community self-defense practices against violence. By exploring the wide-ranging methods women across the globe have employed to protect themselves, their loved ones, and communities, this piece seeks to contribute to current conversations on promoting safety and accountability without resorting to state-based policing and prisons.

Storytelling to connect past, present, and future

Connecting past efforts to current initiatives allows us to both envision a future in which police and prisons are not the sole solutions to gender violence and to know that such possibilities can – and, in some small pockets, do or did – exist.

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In 2004, Mimi Kim launched Creative Interventions, a resource center to promote community-based responses to interpersonal violence. Recognizing that, while activists and others are increasingly embracing the idea of community-based accountability as an alternative to the police, many have difficulty envisioning what accountability processes might look like. The group developed STOP (StoryTelling and Organizing Project), a resource for people to share their experiences with community-based accountability models and interventions to domestic violence, family violence, and sexual abuse. '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,' she stated (Huang, 2008, p. 60).

In their 2001 statement on gender violence and incarceration, Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence challenged communities to not only come up with ways to creatively address violence, but also to document these processes: 'Transformative practices emerging from local communities should be documented and disseminated to promote collective responses to violence' (Critical Resistance and INCITE! 2001). By connecting past and current organizing initiatives from across the globe, 'Where Abolition Meets Actions' hopes to contribute to the conversations around safety and abolition as well as inspires readers to organize in their own communities.

The 1970s (women's liberation: defending themselves and each other)

Women's liberation movements of the 1970s allowed women to begin talking openly about their experiences of sexual assault. Discussions led to a growing realization that women need to take their safety into their own hands and fight back.

Some women formed street patrols to watch for and prevent violence against women. In Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, members of Women's Liberation group Cell 16 began patrolling the streets where women often left their factory jobs after dark. 'We were studying Tae Kwan Do and decided to intentionally patrol, offering to accompany women to their cars or to public transportation,' recalled former Cell 16 member Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. 'The first time two of us went to the nearby factory to offer our services to women workers, the first woman we approached looked terrified and hurried away. We surmised that my combat boots and army surplus garb were intimidating, so after that I dressed more conventionally.'

Later efforts were better received: Dunbar-Ortiz recalled that one night Cell 16 members met Mary Ann Weathers, an African-American woman, at a film screening. 'After the film we introduced ourselves and told her we provided escorts for women. We asked her if she would like us to walk her home, as it was near midnight. Mary Ann Weathers, who joined our group, marveled over the bizarre and wonderful experience of having five white women volunteer to protect her' (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2001, p. 136).

Dunbar-Ortiz also recalled that she traveled around the country speaking and encouraging women to form similar patrols. Students at Iowa State University and the University of Kentucky responded, forming patrols on their campus.

The lack of police and judicial response to gender violence led to increasing recognition that women needed to learn to physically defend themselves from male violence.

In 1969, Cell 16 established Tae Kwan Do classes for women. Unlike existing police offered self-defense classes that promoted fear rather than empowerment, Cell

16's classes challenged students to draw the connections between their learned sense of helplessness and their role in society as women (Lafferty & Clark, 1970, pp. 96–97).

In 1974, believing that all people had the right to live free from violence and recognizing that women were often disproportionately impacted by violence, Nadia Telsey and Annie Ellman started Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts (BWMA) in New York City. 'I have felt that it [self-defense] is connected to self-determination,' stated Ellman. 'We wanted to take our training into our own hands to prevent and avoid violence. We developed programs to reflect and understand that many people who came to our program were oppressed not just because they were women; there were multiple oppressions going on and we felt it was important to address them all.'

By the mid-1970s, the concept of women's self-defense had become so popular that the demand for training sometimes exceeded the number of available instructors. A 1975 issue of *Black Belt Woman*, a feminist martial arts publication, ran an ad for certified women teachers by the Meechee Dojo in Minneapolis to fill the daily requests for self-defense workshops by schools, community groups, and continuing education programs (Lehmann, 1975, p. 19).

The idea of women taking training into their own hands to protect them from violence did not dissolve after the 1970s. Some of the programs and schools founded in the 1970s, such as the BWMA (renamed the Center for Anti-Violence Education or CAE in 1989) and Feminists in Self-Defense Training (FIST) in Olympia, Washington, continue teaching women's self-defense today. Women's groups that emerged in later decades also took on the task of teaching women to defend themselves. In 1992, women in Taos, New Mexico, responded to police indifference to gender violence by forming the Taos Women's Self-Defense Project. Within two years, the Project had taught self-defense to over 400 women, presenting classes in public schools, businesses and health departments (Giggans, 1994, p. 41).

Although much of the 1970s rhetoric and organizing around gender violence presupposed that women were attacked by strangers, women also recognized and organized against violence perpetrated by those that they know, including spouses and intimate partners. In Neu-Isenburg, a small town near Frankfurt, Germany, a group of women called Fan-Shen decided that, rather than establish a shelter for battered women, they would force the abuser out of the house. When a battered woman called the local women's shelter, the group arrived at her home to not only confront her abuser, but also occupy the house as round-the-clock guards to the woman until her abuser moved out. When the strategy was reported in 1977, Fan-Shen had already been successful in five instances ('Women's Patrol,' 1977, p. 18).

Anti-violence organizing in communities of color

Women's Liberation groups were not the only ones to recognize the need for alternative models of preventing gender violence. Communities of color in the USA also developed methods to ensure women's safety without relying on a system that has historically ignored their safety or further threatened it by using gender violence as a pretext for increased force, brutality, and mass incarceration against community members.

In 1979, when Black women were found brutally murdered in Boston's primarily Black Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods, residents organized the Dorchester Green Light Program. The program provided identifiable safe houses for women who were threatened or assaulted on the streets. Program coordinators, who lived in

Dorchester, visited and spoke at community groups and gatherings in their areas. Residents interested in opening their homes as safe houses filled out applications, which included references and descriptions of the house living situation. The program screened each application and checked the references. Once accepted, the resident attended orientation sessions, which included self-defense instruction. They were then given a green light bulb for their porch light; when someone was at home, the green light was turned on as a signal to anyone in trouble. Within eight months, over 100 safe houses had been established (Dejanikus & Kelly, 1979, p. 7).

At a 1986 conference on ending violence against women at UCLA, Beth Richie spoke about a community-based intervention program in East Harlem, a New York neighborhood that was predominantly Black and Latino. Community residents organized to take responsibility for women's safety. 'Safety watchers' visited the house when called by the abused person or the neighbors. They encouraged the abuser to leave; if the abuser refused, the watchers stayed in the house. Their presence prevented further violence, at least while they were present. 'Beth feels violence will probably continue but community consciousness has been raised,' noted one conference attendee. 'In these communities, people do not call the police fearing more violence from the police. Men are not going to jail because the communities are working together' (Bustamante, 1986, p. 14).

Precedents and influences

Women's collective action and organizing to protect themselves and each other did not originate in the 1970s. In fact, some of the methods that emerged during the 1970s had been utilized by women's groups of the past.

In the 1920s, as more women began working in Shanghai's cotton mills, they formed *jiemei hui* or sisterhood societies. In addition to providing acceptable ways for women to spend time together in a gender-segregated society, the *jiemei hui* also offered protection to their members. Local hoodlums gathered at the mill gates and seized women's wages on paydays; on ordinary days, they collected money by 'stripping a sheep' (robbing a woman of her clothes and selling them for money). Female gangsters specialized in the lucrative business of kidnapping young girls to sell to brothels or as future daughters-in-law. Sexual abuse was a pervasive threat: many workers had family members or friends who had been raped, beaten, or kidnapped by neighborhood hoodlums. Members of sisterhoods walked together to and from the mills to protect each other from harassment and attacks. The number of *jiemei hui* increased during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai when women faced the additional threat of assault by Japanese soldiers (Honig, 1997, p. 490).

During the same period, another form of women's communal self-defense emerged in rural China. During the uneasy alliance between the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) and the Communists during the 1920s, women propagandists organized Women's Associations in rural villages to provide support for the armies. Village women, however, began mobilizing around their immediate concerns such as foot binding, women's education, a woman's right to divorce, and abuse. Women's Associations assumed the right to punish abusive husbands and in-laws, often through public humiliation (Croll, 1978, p. 202). In Hankou and other areas, the Women's Associations forced the offending spouse or in-law to walk through the streets wearing a dunce cap and shouting slogans on behalf of women's freedom (Strong, 1928, p. 126).

The 1927 split between the Kuomintang and the Communists halted the burgeoning women's movement. The Kuomintang suppressed Women's Associations, arresting, punishing, and even executing known members. During the Japanese invasion, however, women propagandists once again followed the Communist armies to rural villages and instigated the formation of new Women's Associations.

Unlike their predecessors, Communist propagandists were met with skepticism about the possibility of ending abuse and gaining social and economic equality. The breakthrough came with the 'speak bitterness' meetings in which women were encouraged to talk about their sufferings. While propagandists originally encouraged women to hold these meetings against their local landlords, many identified their husbands and in-laws as their immediate oppressors. In these meetings, each woman learned that many other women in her village experienced the same oppressions. These women, who had been raised with the ancient notion that women were inferior, began recognizing and demanding their right to equality. They also realized the advantage of collective over individual action: 'If we form a Women's Association and everyone tells their bitterness in public, no one will dare to oppress you or any woman again,' stated one rural woman (Belden, 1949, p. 24).

The new Women's Associations also utilized group action to punish wife abuse, sometimes temporarily imprisoning and/or physically beating abusive men. However, the Women's Associations did not need to imprison or beat every abuser. Sometimes the mere threat of a confrontation with the Women's Association was usually enough. In the village of Fanshen, for instance, the Women's Association beat several violent husbands. After that, the women only needed to have a 'serious talk' with the abuser to change his behavior (Hinton, 1966, p. 159).

Contemporary organizing against gender violence

Recent legislation, such as the U.S. Violence Against Women Act (1994), recognizes the problem of gender violence and seeks to increase police responsiveness. However, legislation does little to protect women who are politically, economically, or socially marginalized. Instead, the focus on criminalization and incarceration often places them at further risk of both interpersonal and state violence as well as of arrest, incarceration, and, for immigrant women, deportation (Critical Resistance and INCITE! 2001).

Knowing this, women have acted both individually and collectively to defend themselves. Sex workers, for instance, have organized in different ways to protect themselves from violence.

Some methods are fairly straightforward. In March 2006, police responded to the murders of three sex workers in Daytona Beach, Florida, by cracking down on prostitution. In one weekend, 10 people were arrested in a prostitution sting. Recognizing that the police response did more to target than to protect them, street prostitutes began arming themselves with knives and other weapons to both to protect themselves and each other and to find the killer. 'We will get him first,' declared Tonya Richardson, a Ridgewood Avenue prostitute, to Local 6 News. 'When we find him, he is going to be sorry. It is as simple as that' ('Daytona Prostitutes,' 2006).

In Montreal, sex workers have taken a different approach to ensure their safety. In 1995, sex workers, public health researchers, and sympathizers formed Stella, a sex workers' alliance. Instead of knives and other weapons, the group arms sex workers with information and support to help them keep safe. Stella compiles, updates, and

circulates a Bad Tricks and Assaulters list, enabling sex workers to share information and avoid dangerous situations. It also produces and provides free reference guides that cover working conditions, current solicitation laws, and health information. Recognizing that the criminalization of activities related to the sex industry renders sex workers vulnerable to both outside violence and police abuse, the group also advocates for the decriminalization of these acts (Stella, n.d.).

Sex workers are also taking direct action to stop sex trafficking. In 1997, former sex workers began guarding checkpoints along the Nepal–India border to rescue adolescent Nepalese girls from being smuggled into India. The idea emerged with the women living at Maiti Nepal, a home in Kathmandu for women returning from Indian brothels. Many of the women, who had been kidnapped as adolescents and sold into the sex industry, were ashamed and angry about their experiences and wanted to transform their anger into action. They set up four guard posts along the border and began monitoring for human trafficking. During the first three years, the women caught 70 traffickers, saving 240 girls from India’s brothels.

‘All the girls want to go to the border,’ stated Anuradha Koirala, who runs Maiti Nepal. ‘They are angry but don’t know how to express themselves.’ Being able to rescue others from similar fates has helped many of the women reclaim their sense of self-worth: at the age of 14, Sushma Katuwal was sold to an Indian brothel where she was infected with HIV. After being held for 13 months, she returned to Kathmandu. ‘I came back from hell,’ she recalled. ‘I am trying to stop these girls from being sold like I was.’ In 2000 alone, the 19-year-old rescued 15 girls and caught four human traffickers. ‘As long as I survive, this is what I am going to do,’ she declared (Filkins, 2000, p. 1).

Women marginalized by other factors, such as racism and poverty, have also organized to protect themselves against both interpersonal and state violence.

In 2000, the police murders of two young women of color sparked a dialogue about violence against women among members of Sista II Sista, a collective of women of color in Brooklyn, New York. The group’s preexisting work had empowered young women of color to identify and work toward solving their own problems. Their response was to form Sistas Liberated Ground, a zone in their neighborhood where crimes against women would not be tolerated. ‘We wanted the community to stand up against violence as a long-term solution because our dependence on a police system that was inherently sexist, homophobic, racist, and classist did not decrease the ongoing violence against women we were seeing in our neighborhoods. In fact, at times, the police themselves were its main perpetrators,’ members of the group stated in 2007 (Burrowes, Cousins, Rojas, & Ude, 2007, p. 229). Sista II Sista instituted an ‘action line,’ which women could call, inform the group about violence in their lives, and explore the options that they – and the group – could take to change the situation. In addition, Sista II Sista established Sister Circles which, similar to the ‘speak bitterness’ meetings of the Communist Women’s Associations in China, allowed women to talk about violence and other problems in their daily lives and encouraged the community – rather than the individual woman – to find solutions.

In one instance, a woman at the Sister Circle talked about the man who had been stalking her for over a year. Although no physical violence had occurred, he was becoming increasingly aggressive toward her. Members of the Sister Circle confronted the man at the barbershop where he worked. When they learned about his actions, his male co-workers told the stalker that, if he continued to harass the woman, he would be fired. He stopped stalking her (Ude, 2006).

Creating communities to deter violence

Not all strategies to prevent gender violence are easily classified as ‘policing from below.’ Some grassroots groups and coalitions recognize that building communities is the first line of defense against violence and are organizing to create social structures and support networks that can collectively address harmful situations.

In Durham, North Carolina, in the aftermath of the 2006 rape of a Black woman by members of a Duke University lacrosse team, women of color and survivors of sexual violence formed UBUNTU. UBUNTU, named after the Bantu meaning ‘I am because we are,’ is a coalition working to ‘facilitate a systematic transformation of our communities until the day that sexual violence does not occur’ (UBUNTU). Alexis Pauline Gumbs recounted an instance in which an UBUNTU member encountered a woman who had been beaten by her former partner:

This UBUNTU member called the rest of us to see who was home and available in the direct neighborhood, took the young woman into her home and contacted the spiritual leader of the woman who had experienced the violence along with other women that the young woman trusted from her spiritual community, who also came to the home, and made sure that she was able to receive medical care. She also arranged for members of our UBUNTU family to have a tea session with the young woman to talk about healing and options, to share our experiences, to embrace the young woman and to let her know that she wasn’t alone in her healing process. (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2008, pp. 80–81)

Gumbs noted:

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

In that way, everything that we do to create community, from childcare to community gardening (our new project!), to community dinners, to film screenings, to political discussions helps to clarify how, why, and how deeply we are ready to be there for each other in times of violence and celebration. (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2008, p. 81)

From this community-building, UBUNTU members began organizing around the idea of a Harm-Free Zone – an area in which violence would be addressed by the community rather than by the police.

‘We shall see [what this looks like in practice] because we’re still at the beginning of it,’ stated Gumbs in 2009, a year after the idea of a Harm-Free Zone emerged. ‘A lot of times we talk about community as if it already exists, but I don’t actually think that we have autonomous, completely sustained community. We live with all sorts of dependence on the state, [on] outside institutions. We have a lot of work to do to have the type of communications and support that would fulfill the needs of our community.’

Like the Dorchester Green Light Program, organizers of the Harm-Free Zone brought these ideas to the communities of which they were already a part. ‘Those of us who came together were already working in those settings, so it wasn’t just [us] going and taking over the local elementary school. Somebody’s mom was inspired by

what somebody [on the committee] said and invited them to come and speak at [the school's] Women's History Month,' recalled Gumbs. 'For each of us, we're thinking about how we bring that analysis and that ideal into our preexisting communities.'

Conclusion

Many early anti-violence efforts addressed immediate instances of gender violence, often focusing on the physical aspects of self-defense or a direct response to violence. Women's organizations taught self-defense classes, confronted abusers and assailants, and formed protective groups to escort each other safely through the streets. In contrast, contemporary organizing often utilizes a multilayered approach, creatively addressing not only immediate instances of violence but also creating dialogue to challenge and change some of the root causes of gender violence. For instance, the efforts of Stella and UBUNTU are not traditionally seen as self-defense tactics, but they do work to keep women safe from violence. Despite these differences, each project emphasizes the importance of community – as opposed to individual – actions and responses. None of these projects – from the Women's Associations of the 1920s and 1940s to the Dorchester Green Light program in Massachusetts to the contemporary organizing among sex workers – would have succeeded without a collective sense of responsibility toward each other.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs has described UBUNTU's fledgling Harm-Free Zone as 'building safety from the ground up': 'When we say "from the ground up," [we're talking about] really participating in the full life of a community and not just creating a special utopia of ten friends who have a vision that's so abolitionist and radical,' she elaborated.

Annie Ellman also talked about the importance of community and community-building: 'What people gain here [at BWMA] besides self-defense skills is some understanding about collective action, about struggling with your community ... If we believe that people have the right to live free of violence, we have to work together to try to transform our communities as ones who will stand up and fight against different kinds of injustice.'

While not every project and group explicitly identifies as an abolitionist group, their practices work toward a radical re-envisioning of creating safety without relying on police. In addition, some groups do work with other antiviolence and abolitionist organizations.

BWMA has, at times, joined in coalition work against police brutality and in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal as well as women incarcerated for self-defense. By the time it changed its name in 1989, CAE had broadened its focus to teach self-defense to other populations disproportionately impacted by violence such as gay men, transgender people, people living with HIV and AIDS, and queer homeless youth (of all genders). 'What we often do is we go out and do educational work for organizations that are more on the front lines doing organizing work,' stated Ellman. After 9/11 increased racist violence against Arab American, South Asian, and Muslim communities, CAE provided free self-defense and violence prevention workshops to women at grassroots organizations that served these communities ('Spotlight on Community Action,' 2004, p. 19).

Alexis Pauline Gumbs noted that UBUNTU's Harm-Free Zone organizing was inspired and influenced by Critical Resistance organizing: one member had previously helped organize a Harm-Free Zone with the New York City Critical Resistance chapter

and several people were part of both the Durham chapter of Critical Resistance and the Harm-Free Zone organizing committee.

Although each of the initiatives described works specifically in certain communities, there is the potential for these models to be shared and adapted to other locations and situations.

Gumbs pointed to the Gulabi Gang, a group of women in India who physically punish abusive husbands, and to Sistahs Liberated Ground as inspirations for the Harm-Free Zone organizing in Durham: ‘We understand that work in that context while also understanding that our conditions are really specific.’

Other groups have also drawn on past and present models of collective action and community accountability processes. The 1970s German women’s group Fan-Shen derived its name from the model Chinese village where Women’s Associations stopped wife abuse. More recently, activists in Santa Cruz were influenced by a documentary about a 1970s feminist group that collectively confronted sexual assaulters, forming Snap Back! in 2002. Snap Back! members used a similar tactic to confront a man who had sexually assaulted their friend. ‘We went to his house at night with her and we made him come outside,’ recalled Snap Back! member Megan Reed. ‘She talked to him about what had happened while the rest of us stood there showing solidarity with her. She decided to go inside to have a longer conversation with him (about an hour). Then we left.’

Although nothing more happened, Reed believed that their action had further-reaching effects: ‘I think it scared the crap out of him and he’ll think twice before doing anything like that again,’ she stated. The action also ‘gave her [the survivor] a sense of closure. If you don’t want to go through the legal system, there are few alternatives as to what you can do to get closure and confront that person and feel that a politically justifiable result has been attained.’ Knowledge about a past group’s approaches toward sexual assault enabled Snap Back! members to help their friend confront her assailant in a way that did not involve the police or prisons.

‘Where Abolition Meets Actions’ utilizes Mimi Kim’s storytelling approach to envision different possibilities of a world without policing and prisons. These models are important for imagining and then realizing abolitionist principles. By examining the variety of approaches in their vastly different contexts, we can begin to connect the abstract ideal with concrete actions that make another world possible. We should be drawing lessons from these projects and approaches to create models that work for our own locations and communities.

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