

A short (and incomplete) history of community organising against intimate and gendered violence

Victoria Law gives a brief tour against violence from the ground up.

On 18 December 1752, the *New York Gazette* reported that an 'odd Sect of People' had been appearing in New Jersey. Calling themselves the Regulars, they dressed in women's clothes, painted their faces and then visited the homes of reported wife-beaters. They stripped the abusive husband and flogged him with rods, chanting, 'Woe to the men that beat their wives.' The author of the article noted, 'It seems that several Persons in the Borough (and 'tis said some very deservedly) have undergone the Discipline, to the no small Terror of theirs, who are in any Way conscious of deserving the same Punishment' (Cutler, 1969).

The following year, the *New York Gazette* printed a letter by a 'Prudence Goodwife' whose husband had incurred the wrath of the Regulars: '[T]hey have regulated my dear husband, and the rest of the Bad Ones hereabouts that they are afraid of using such Barbarity; and I must with Pleasure acknowledge, that since my Husband has felt what whipping was, he has entirely left off whipping me, and promises faithfully he will never begin again' (Cutler, 1969).

The example of the Regulars demonstrates the potential of community responses to stop gender violence, especially at a time when wife beating was both legally and

socially condoned. Women have historically been unable to rely on traditional police forces to protect them from violence, particularly violence from family members. In earlier times, women's status was essentially that of property belonging to their fathers, husbands or sons. This status has not only been used to justify violence against them, but has influenced modern-day police attitudes and response (or the lack thereof) to gender violence. Even in

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the late twentieth century, police continue to respond to domestic abuse calls with indifference. In large part because of this indifference, women and other vulnerable populations have organised grassroots responses to intimate violence.

These responses have taken various forms – from self-defence classes for women to creating community support structures that can mobilise to respond to gendered violence. While some of these endeavours evolved from police inaction, others recognise that the accelerating growth of the prison system is not about public safety as much as a means of state repression, disempowering oppressed communities and disenfranchising huge segments of the population. (Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2001)

Self-defence

With the onset of the Women's Liberation movement in the USA, police and judicial indifference to gender violence led to increasing recognition that women needed to take their safety into their own hands and learn to physically defend themselves from male violence. In New York City in 1974, the belief that all people had the right to live free from violence and the recognition that women, especially those with the least access to resources, were often disproportionately impacted by violence, propelled Nadia Telsey and Annie Ellman to start Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts. 'I have felt that it [self-defense] is connected to self-determination', stated Ellman.

It's really important to be able to be taking [seriously] our safety, health, well-being, and right to live free from violence and try to create an organisation that was going to make this happen...[We wanted to] take our training into our own hands to prevent and avoid violence. We developed programs very much to reflect and to really 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 ...It was really important to us to see that intersection of oppression ...and to see oppression as the glue that holds violence together.

(A. Ellman, interview, 23 December 2009 with the author.)

Feminist martial arts teachers also saw learning self-defence as a way to empower those who had survived intimate violence.

Whenever we're working with people who have been abused, a big part of our program is helping people work through the violence and reclaim strength and pride and resiliency that we've always had ... Women lose it [their sense of strength] once they've been attacked, especially if they've been attacked as children, and it's

very hard to get it back.
(Ibid., 2009)

Collective resistance

Women have also acted in other ways to keep survivors of abuse safe. At a 1986 conference on ending violence against women at UCLA, Beth Richie cited the example of a community-based intervention programme in East Harlem, a New York neighbourhood that was predominantly Black and Latino. Recognising that the existing choices that an abused woman faced – leaving her home or turning her abuser over to a racist judicial system – community residents organised to take responsibility for women's safety. 'Safety watchers' visited the house when called by the abused person or the neighbours. 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 (Bustamante, 1986).

More recently, 'queer communities of colour' in the Pacific Northwest recognised that community-building could both prevent and address partner abuse by breaking through isolation, forming FAR Out (Friends Are Reaching Out) in 1999.

Recognising that isolation is a crucial, but underestimated, element of abuse, FAR Out encourages friends and family members to keep in touch and to

develop processes to openly talk about their relationships.

In abusive relationships, the abuser distorts their partner's perceptions of reality and self-worth. No matter what the reality actually is, the abuser twists it to demonstrate how worthless the other person is. If the abuser acknowledges that harm has occurred (and many times abusers do not), they twist the course

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of events to blame the partner for provoking it. Over time, with no other mirror to reflect reality, the abused partner begins to believe these lies and to believe that they deserve this abuse. However, this tactic often goes unrecognised by the abused partner's friends and potential supporters, thus contributing to their sense of isolation from the larger community.

Having friends commit to staying in contact with an abuse survivor enables them to challenge and counter these distortions. FAR Out's reliance on pre-existing friendships rather than impersonal social service agencies or the police strengthens the capacity of the community to handle abuse (Smith, 2005).

Pink sari gang

It would be an oversimplification to assume that past anti-violence efforts relied on physical force while current initiatives involve nonviolent community-building. In present-day India, for example, women have literally fought back against abuse, employing tactics similar to the Regulars of the 1750s. In 2005, India passed the *Protection for Women from Domestic Violence Act*, criminalising gender violence not only against wives but any

woman residing in a shared household, including sisters, mothers, daughters, widows and divorced women. However, in the Banda area, one of the

poorest regions of India's northern Uttar Pradesh state, the Act has halted neither violence nor police indifference. Recognising their inability to rely on police protection, the women in that region formed the Gulabi (or Pink Sari) Gang. The several hundred women in the Gulabi Gang wear pink saris and carry pink lathis (sticks). The lathis are purportedly for self-defence, but

they have also been used to thrash husbands who have abandoned or beaten their wives. 'Nobody comes to our help in these parts', stated Devi. 'So sometimes we have to take the law into our hands.' While some may dismiss their actions as no better than vigilante acts, it must be recognised that these women are acting to not only protect themselves and each other, but also to visibly challenge societal acceptance of violence against women (Reeves, 2008).

These stories make up only a short and very incomplete history of community organising against gender violence. Many more examples, both historical and present-day, exist and should be researched, explored and learned from. Knowing about these possibilities allows us to draw on others' experiences and begin conceiving of and actively working towards a world in which communities, rather than police, take safety into their own hands. ■

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