

taking risks: implementing grassroots community accountability strategies

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Sexual violence is often treated as a hyper-delicate 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 of as “animals,” unable to be redeemed or transformed.¹ These extreme attitudes alienate every-day 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.²

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 model. In the following 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 work that is

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.³

Below is a list of ten guidelines that we have found important and useful to consider.

CARA's Accountability Principles

1. 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 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.⁴

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.

2. 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 have

identify who will be involved in this process. Some survivors may find it helpful for friends or someone from outside of the community to help assess and facilitate the process with their community. To promote explicit shared responsibility, the survivor and 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.

3. 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.⁵ Consider questions such as: how will the abuser react when he is confronted about his abusive behavior? How can we work together to de-mechanize the aggressor’s strategies? Remember, one does not have control over the aggressor’s violence, but you do have control over how you can prepare and respond to it.

Violence can escalate when an aggressor is confronted about her behavior. Threats of revenge, suicide, stalking, 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. They may use privilege such as class, race, age, or socio-political 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.

4. 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 of 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 that

community so much that he 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.⁶ 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 of moments of rape to 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 political 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.

7. 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 restoration for the damage she has done.

8. 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 make follow through with their demands.

9. Consider help from the aggressor’s friends, family, and people close to her. 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

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.

10. 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 *on-going* 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 adding its own distinctive features to make the body of the accountability process its own.

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. While organizers should be committed to some fundamental political principles (womanism/feminism, anti-racism, pro-queer, etc.), and can build on the organizing principles we

listed above, the context of any situation will likely be complex, and 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. 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 incidence 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.⁷ As a strategy to step around this problem of credibility, we implement a jazzy 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 to actively consider 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 important pieces of the story 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

vital, deeply liberatory, meaningful, and geared towards 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. ■

1

For the purposes of this article, we use the word "aggressor" to refer to a person who has committed an act of sexual violence (rape, sexual harassment, coercion, etc.) on another person. Our use of the word "aggressor" is not an attempt to weaken the severity of rape. In our work of defining accountability outside of the criminal system, we try not to use criminal-based vocabulary such as "perpetrator," "rapist," or "sex predator." We also use pronouns interchangeably throughout the article.

2

Golding, Jacqueline M., et al. "Social Support Sources Following Assault," *Journal of Community Psychology*, 17:92-107, January 1989. This paper is just one example of research showing that survivors are much more likely to access friends and family for support than they are to access police or rape crisis centers. Golding's research reveals that 59% of survivors surveyed reported that they disclosed their assault to friends and relatives, while 10.5% reported to police and 1.9% re-ported to rape crisis centers. Interestingly, Golding's research also asserts that survivors rated rape crisis centers as most helpful and law enforcement as least helpful. She suggests that, since friends or relatives are the most frequent contact for rape victim disclosure, efforts should focus on enhancing and supporting this informal intervention.

3

Borrowing from philosopher Cornel West, we can call this approach of simultaneous improvisation and structure a “jazzy approach.” Much like jazz music, a community accountability process can incorporate many different and diverse components that allow for the complexity of addressing sexual violence while also respecting the need for some stability and careful planning. Also, like jazz music, an accountability process is not an end point or a finite thing, but a living thing that continues to be created. Our understanding of community accountability ultimately transcends the idea of simply holding an abusive community member responsible for his or her actions, but also includes the vision of the community itself being accountable for supporting a culture that allows for sexual violence. This latter accountability process truly necessitates active and constant re-creating and re-affirming a community that values liberation for everyone.

4

We define “internalized oppression,” as the process of a person that belongs to a marginalized and oppressed group accepting, promoting, and justifying beliefs of inferiority and lack of value about her group and, perhaps, herself.

5

Thank you to the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse for asserting the verb in “safety plan.”

6

We do not mean to simply imply that the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” should be completely discarded. However, we also recognize that this particular goal is actually often disregarded in a criminal system that is entrenched with institutional racism and oppression. Our goal is to create values that are independent from a criminal justice-based approach to accountability, including thinking critically about ideas such as “innocent until proven guilty” from the perspective of how these ideas actually impact oppressed people.

7

More thinking may need to be done to address situations in which people are intentionally lying about an account of rape or abuse. What happens if someone uses an accusation of abuse as a tool to isolate, punish or control that person? This could happen in an abusive relationship, but it could also happen as function of oppression (for example, a straight woman accuses a queer woman of harassment simply by virtue of her being queer, or a white woman accuses a Black man of sexual assault because of her own racism). Another problem is when a person experiences an event as violent, but this experience doesn’t fit the community’s general definition of “violence.” The community may need to figure out if it should expand its notion of “violence” or if a different analysis and response is needed. Lastly, while struggling through these questions, we’d like to caution our left/progressive community against creating a culture of endless process that stands in for organized action. Issues of credibility, as well as other controversial issues, are complicated and can sap a group’s time and energy. You may not even need to come to consensus about how to finally think about what happened. But this doesn’t necessarily mean you can’t come to consensus on a plan of action to respond.