ON WOMEN & VIOLENCE

NOTES & INTRODUCTIONS

from the NC Piece Corps

We present these two essays in a humble effort to contribute to ongoing debates around feminist struggle, violence, and self-defense. The first, titled "Justice is a Woman with a Sword," is a classic of the 2nd Wave. This essay sought to question the (then) assumed pacifism of "women," as connected to certain notions of femininity, and the often unexamined adoption of such a stance by the growing feminist movement of the 60's and 70's. The idea that women could take "justice" into their own hands, to directly defend themselves from an epidemic of patriarchal violence and sexual assault, was an extremely radical idea for many at the time. The growth of a vast array of women's martial arts schools and organizations, not to mention the spread of women's shelters and crisis centers, directly owes its existence to this radical realization that women did not need to rely on men's institutions (police, the State, the Church, etc.) to protect themselves.

The anarchist implications of this position are clear, but the article also carries its own problems. In addition to being connected to certain "dated" positions of the 2nd Wave (the outright dismissal of BDSM being one example), the article largely frames the issues of violence and self-defense in individualistic terms. Given the immediate practical necessity of responding to street (and bedroom-) level sexual assault this perhaps makes sense, but framing the use of violence in such a way set the women's movement up for co-optation. Now we can see everyone from racist, far right-wing politicians like Michelle Bachman or Sarah Palin to college undergrads affirming the once foreign notion of a women's right to defend herself. While this development can certainly be seen in positive terms, it has happened in such a way as to utterly depoliticize women's self-defense—sexual assault is now understood only in individualistic and situationally specific terms, divorced from any deeper analysis that might help us understand why such violence continues in epidemic proportions.

The assumed protagonist of women's self-defense is also problematic in the essay; the article's position feels like a reaction to a specifically middle-class white feminism, and perhaps generally to middle-class notions of femininity and gender. Like in many feminist writings of the time, "woman" is treated as a uniform category or class, in such a way as to render the vast differences or racial and class experiences (and thus also standards around violence and behavior) invisible. This does not necessarily make the article's critique wrong, but perhaps less useful (or even redundant) for communities which harbor standards or histories different from the middle-class white protagonist.

In some ways, the second essay in this text by Victoria Law bridges the gap between the individualist violent response and the collective resistance of entire communities. Law discusses the history of women's self-defense or-

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Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah. 2008. An Interview with Alexis Paulina Gumbs of UBUNTU. In The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Partner Abuse in Activist Communities, ed. Ching-In Chen, Dulani, and Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha, 80-82. Oakland, CA: The editors.

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ganizing, but connects it with ongoing community efforts to deal preventatively with the violence of men. While the first essay's "anti-statism" emerges implicitly as a natural result of practical realities on the ground (men's institutions do not protect women), Law goes a step further towards a more explicitly anarchist position, where the State is directly understood as a tremendous purveyor of exploitation and violence. Women's self-defense, as a communal as well as individual response, is more than just a practical necessity, it is a *strategy*.

Of course, one might object on several points to this strategy. First, simply not using the State in our attempts to protect ourselves does little to rid us of that demon. Undermining and destroying the State and Capital require more than simply not calling the cops; it requires us going on the offensive. Examples of women doing this abound, from the eco-defense of the Vancouver 5 to anti-debt struggles of Bolivia's Mujeres Libres, and the more our community efforts are connected with such offensives the stronger they will be. Real "abolitionism" is an offensive as well as defensive endeavor.

Another objection could be made on the grounds of recuperation. The State has already proven its ability to co-opt community violence prevention programs of all kinds, from community policing to Neighborhood Watch organizations to Head Start. What makes the violence prevention efforts of abolitionism mentioned in this essay any different? Is a specifically abolitionist or even anarchist perspective enough to innoculate these efforts from co-optation? Again, how is our defense connected to our offense?

Each of these articles is a response to the specific conditions of its time – the first a critique of the unexamined pacifism of a new women's movement, the second a reaction to the co-optation of individualistic self-defense efforts and the drastic increase in State violence. But, along with their specificities, these pieces also make general contributions to a struggle for liberation. We hope that these articles can raise more questions in the anarchist milieu, and contribute to discussions around gender and violence in the future.

for total freedom,
NC Piece Corps

JUSTICE IS A WOMAN WITH A SWORD

by D.A. Clarke

The "womanliness" invented by pornographers is a deep masochism, which renders women as powerless to defend self and others as the sweetness-and-light female patience and martyrdom of Christian romanticism. It's but a short step from the ladylike and therefore ineffectual face-slaps of Nice Girls to the "hot and steamy surrender" in the dominant male's brawny embrace. But a woman with a sword, that is a different matter.

"Justice is a woman with a sword"--as slogans go, it is strangely evocative. The sword, after all, is the weapon of chivalry and honour. Aristocratic criminals were privileged to meet their deaths by the sword rather than the disgraceful hempen rope; gentlemen settled their differences and answered insults at swords' point. Women and peasants, of course, did not learn swordplay. The weapon, like the concepts of honour and personal courage it represented, was reserved for men, and only to those of good birth; no one else was expected or permitted to have a sense of personal pride or honour. Offences against a woman were revenged by her chosen champion.

A woman with a sword, then, is a powerful emblem. She is no one's property. A crime against her will be answered by her own hand. She is armed with the traditional weapon of honour and vengeance, implying both that she has a sense of personal dignity and worth, and that affronts against that dignity will be hazardous to the offending party. This is hardly the woman of pornographic male fantasy.

In male fantasy, women are always powerless to defend themselves from hurt and humiliation. Worse, they enjoy them. Treatment that would drive the average self-respecting man to desperate violence makes these fantasy-women tremble, breathe heavily, and moan with desire: abuse and embarrassment are their secret needs. The "womanliness" invented by pornographers is a deep masochism, which renders women as powerless to defend self and others as the sweetness-and-light female patience and martyrdom of Christian romanticism. It's but a short step from the ladylike and therefore ineffectual face-slaps of Nice Girls to the "hot and steamy surrender" in the dominant male's brawny embrace.

But a woman with a sword, that is a different matter.

The troublesome question of nonviolence haunts the women's movement and always has. We despise the brutality to which women are subjected by men, the arrogance and casual destructiveness of male violence as embodied in domestic battery, gang skirmishes, and officially sanctioned wars. Feminists have traditionally opposed police brutality, the draft, warfare, rape, blood sports, and other manifestations of the masculine fascination with dominance and death.

Yet like all oppressed peoples, women are divided on the essential question of violence as a tactic. When is it appropriate to become violent? Is the use of force ever justifiable? When

Notes on the Author

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munity 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 alter- natives 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.

is it time to take up arms? To learn jujitsu? To carry a knife? Is violence just plain wrong, no matter who does it? Or can there be extenuating circumstances?

The flow of our debate is muddied by traditional ideas of womanliness with which feminists struggle. Are women really better than men? Are we inherently kinder, gentler, less aggressive? Certainly the world would be a better place if everyone manifested the virtues tradition assigns to Good Women. But will gentleness and kindness really win the hearts of nasty and violent people? Will reason, patience, and setting a good example make men see the error of their ways? Is "womanly" non-violence "naturally" the best and only course for feminists?

Historically, the prospect for peoples and cultures which avoid violence is not good. They tend to lose territory, property, freedom, and finally life itself as soon as less pleasant neighbors show up with better armaments and bigger ambitions. It's hard to survive as a pacifist when the folks next door are club-waving, rock-hurling imperialists: you end up enslaved or dead, or you learn to be like them in order to fight them. The greatest challenge to nonviolence is that to fulfill its promise it must be able to prevent violence. The image of the nonviolent activist righteously renouncing the use of force--while watching armed thugs drag away their struggling victims--is less than pleasing.

We have also the problem of effectiveness. Non-violence is far more impressive when practised by those who could easily resort to force if they chose. A really big, tough man in the prime of life who chooses to discipline himself to peace and gentleness is an impressive personality. A mob of thousands who choose to sit down peaceably and silently in the street, rather than smash windows and overrun police lines, is an unnerving sight. These kinds of nonviolence make a profound political point. But when women advocate non-violence it may be much less effective.

Why? Because women are traditionally considered incapable of violence, particularly of violence against men. In the 40's the film beauty used to beat her little fists ineffectually on the strong man's chest before collapsing into passionate tears; in the 70's the ditzy female sidekick inevitably left the safety catch on when it was time to shoot the bad guy. Women are commonly held to be as incompetent at physical force as they are at mechanics, mathematics, and race car driving. The only violence traditionally permitted to women is the sneaky kind: conspiracy, manipulation, deceit, poison, a stiletto in the back.

And when women do become violent, we perceive it as shocking and awful, far worse than the male violence which we take for granted. There is a self-serving myth among men that, given power, women would be "even worse" than the worst men–which, of course, justifies keeping women firmly in their place and making sure no power gets into their nasty little hands. Many of us believe that myth, to some extent: I can remember my mother (a strong and resourceful woman) retailing to me the common doctrine that the female camp guards of the Third Reich were worse than the men.

Of course, only a handful of women attained to power in Hitler's Germany; prison-guarding is an unfeminine occupation, also. So female camp guards, of high or low rank, were exceptional and therefore suspect.

Their deeds are documented and unquestionably vile, but it's hard for me to say how they might be distinguished as measurably worse, more evil, than those of their male colleagues. What makes them worse in the eyes of Allied historians, I fear, is that in addition to their other crimes they stepped out of women's place.

This different perception of male and female violence, this double standard, afflicts women at the most elementary levels. When a man makes unwanted social advances to a woman in, let's say, a restaurant or theatre, and she eventually has to tell him loudly and angrily to get lost–she is the one who will be perceived as rude, hostile, aggressive, and obnoxious. His verbal aggression and invasiveness are accepted and expected, her rudeness or mere curtness in getting rid of him is noticed and condemned. One of our great myths is that a "real lady" can and should handle any difficulty, defuse any assault, without ever raising her voice or losing her manners. Female rudeness or violence in resistance to male aggression has often been taken to prove that the woman was not a lady in the first place, and therefore deserved no respect from the aggressor or sympathy from others.

Until recently, violent women in fiction were always evil. Competence with guns, long blades, or martial arts automatically marked a female character as "mannish", possibly lesbian, destined for stereotyping as a prison matron, pervert, manhater, sadist, etc. On the other hand, cleverness with tiny silver-plated pistols, poison rings, or jewelled daggers identified your "snakelike" villainness whose cold and perfect beauty concealed a heart twisted by malice and frozen with selfishness. Heroines, predictably, fainted or screamed at moments of peril and then waited to be rescued in the penultimate chapter. By the 1920's the Good Girls might put up a brave struggle and kick the bad guy in the shins, but they certainly did not throw furniture, break necks, cut throats, or whip out a sword-cane and chase the villain through the abandoned warehouse.

Tougher females emerged for a while in the war years, but only in the last 20 years have fictional females arrived who are ready with fists, karate kicks, and small arms. A new genre of Amazon Fantasy has grown up, where previously there were only one or two authors who dared to put a sword in a female character's hand. Warrior women have become protagonists, with books and even epics to themselves. Admittedly, most of them are required by the author (or editor) to Learn to Love A Man Again by the end of the plot, but at least they start out by avenging their own rapes and their family's wrongs. In commercial film (a conservative medium) fighting heroines and anti-heroines are beginning to surface: Sigourney Weaver in Aliens, Anne Parillaud in La Femme Nikita, Deborra-Lee Furness in Shame, and of course there are Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon Thelma & Louise. Even in films with no pretense to social commentary or good intentions, fighting female sidekicks are popping up here and there (Conan the Destroyer, The Golden Child) who previously were restricted to the world of Marvel Comics.

Americans are beginning to be able to handle the idea of female rage and vengeance, or at least of serious female violence, in fiction. In much the same way, the reading public of the 20's and 30's began to accept the Career Woman long before women made real inroads into the professions. Does

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 Com-

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

this mean something? Is the ability to be violent a prerequisite for equality--as the maintenance of army and arsenal is for nationhood? Are these fighting females a good sign?

Maybe. In a perfect world, no. In a perfect world we wouldn't lock our doors, and no one would know how to throw a punch or how to roll with one. In this world, alas, perhaps the price of full citizenship is the willingness and ability to defend one's self and one's dignity to the point of force.

We do respect people who "know their limits", who cannot be pushed past a certain point–just as we mistrust and disrespect those who have no give in them at all and overreact violently to every little frustration. We respect people who can take care of themselves, who inform us of their limits clearly and look prepared to enforce them. Women are traditionally denied these qualities–the "no means yes" of male mythology--and one reason for this is that we are denied the use of force. To put it very simply, little boys who get pushed around on the playground are usually told to "stand up to him, don't let him get away with it," whereas little girls are more usually advised to run to Teacher.

The bottom line in not being pushed around is our willingness and our capacity to resist. At some point resistance means defending ourselves with physical force. Women, kept out of contact sports, almost never trained in wrestling or boxing as boys often are, taught to flatter strong men by acting weak, are denied the skills and the emotional preparedness required to fight back.

Men commit the most outrageous harassments and insults against women simply because they can get away with it: they know they will not get hurt for saying and doing things that, between two men, would quickly lead to a fist fight or a stabbing. There are no consequences for abusing women.

There are several ways to prevent crimes from happening. One is education and reason, and our effort to bring up children to be good adults. Then comes elementary preparedness and awareness on the part of the innocent. Then there is active resistance and self-defence when a crime is attempted; lastly, there is the establishment of consequences for the perpetrator. Every time a man molests his daughter and still keeps his place in the family and community–every time a man sexually harasses a female employee and still keeps his job or his business reputation–every time a rapist or femicide gets a token sentence--there is a terrible lack of consequence for the commission of a crime.

We disagree as a society about the level of "punishment" or retribution or reparation which should be enforced. We can't agree whether murderers should themselves be killed. Most of us would agree that hanging is too severe a penalty for stealing a loaf of bread or a sheep, but is it too severe a penalty for hacking a woman to death? Some would say yes and some no. Others think we should abandon the concept of punishment or reparation altogether, with their authoritarian implications, and concentrate on re-educating and reclaiming our errant brothers, turning them into better people.

While we argue about these things, women are steadily and consistently being insulted, molested, assaulted and murdered. And most of the men who are doing these things are suffering no consequences at all, or

very slight consequences. The less the consequence of their offence, the more it seems to them (and to everyone) that there is really nothing so very wrong with what they have done.

When as a society we sanctimoniously clasp our hands and reject the death penalty, letting femicides and rapists free after token jail terms and "therapy", we merely make a callous value judgement. We judge that a man's life–even a rapist's or a murderer's–is more valuable than the life and happiness of the next woman or child he may attack.

Effectively, when a killer is released and kills again, those who released him signed the death warrant for his next victim, someone they did not know and could not identify: that person's life was the price of their squeamishness and reluctance to sign the death warrant for a man they could name, whose face they knew.

If the State is not going to step in and enforce severe penalties for abusing and murdering women, then is it women's responsibility to do so? When a woman's dignity, honour, and physical person are assaulted or destroyed, how shall we get justice? How shall we prevent it from happening again?

If the courtroom and the law are owned by men (if a Clarence Thomas, for example, can be appointed to the Supreme Court regardless of the evidence that he routinely insulted and harassed women) at what point are women entitled to take the law into their own hands? At what point can we justify personal vendettas by angry survivors of male violence? What about violent action for political (rather than personal) agendas?

It's a thorny question for sure. Vigilanteism is so very trendy in our fragmenting culture: in films and cheap novels by the dozen, angry protagonists (almost all male) go out and shoot up the bad guys in a series of solo crusades, for revenge and the justice that a corrupt and ineffectual System cannot provide. America's love affair with flashy violence and alpha-male bravado is so traditional and distressing that one does hesitate to suggest vigilanteism as a feminist tactic.

Yet–but–on the other hand–sometimes a demonstration of violent rage accomplishes what years of prayers, petitions, and protests cannot: it gets you taken seriously. (On the other hand, it can also get you labelled crazy and put away.) Palestinian terrorists may have done more harm than good to their people's cause–or they may have been an essential part of a liberation struggle. It depends who you ask.

When we consider violent political tactics such as terrorism and retribution, we have to remember that male implementation of these tactics is all mixed up with the traditions of male amusement and competition. Too often the political cause of the moment is no more than an excuse for a gang of rowdy boys to play about with high explosives and automatic weapons–just another form of blood sport. Often there is more violence, and more random violence, than is called for–simply because the terrorists are having so much fun frightening and killing people.

Would women succumb to this temptation?

Another common belief about female violence is that it will only escalate male violence. I have heard from people of widely varying ages and politics the argument "if women learn judo, then men will start using guns." This rather sidesteps the fact that a large number of men already own and

as adolescents and sold into the sex industry, were ashamed and angry about their experiences and wanted to trans- form 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 ongo- ing 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 bitter- ness' 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 coworkers 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

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, incar- ceration, 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 prosti- tution. 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 them- selves 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 advo- cates 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

use guns, knives, and other portable weapons; but it's a familiar argument from all liberation struggles. What if resistance to the occupier/oppressor only leads to increased brutality, repression, and suffering?

We can end up in a sadly familiar conflict–some women will hate and fear feminists and self-defence advocates because they anticipate that male anger, stirred up by these uppity females, will be vented on all women, including the "innocent." No liberation movement has ever escaped this bitter argument.

Will we make it worse by resisting? Feminists who demonstrated publicly and disruptively at the turn of the century were accused at the time of worsening women's prospects by their violent and provocative behavior; yet today we honour them as the instigators of changes that lifted women halfway out of serfdom. Certainly forceful and loud resistance to sexual assault tends to result more often in escape or reduced injury than "womanly" tactics like tears, pleading, or co-operation.

If the risk involved in attacking a woman were greater, there might be fewer attacks. If women defended themselves violently, the amount of damage they were willing to do to would-be assailants would be the measure of their seriousness about the limits beyond which they would not be pushed. If more women killed husbands and boyfriends who abused them or their children, perhaps there would be less abuse. A large number of women refusing to be pushed any further would erode, however slowly, the myth of the masochistic female which threatens all our lives. Violent resistance to attack has its advantages all round.

A backlash is always possible, whether women "behave" or not. The strength and viciousness of antifeminism, and its appeal, have a lot more to do with the prevailing economic and political weather than with anything women actually do. A subject population can be as polite, conciliatory, and assimilated as possible–and still wake up one morning to discriminatory laws, confiscation of property, and all the rest.

For these reasons the argument that female violence "will only hurt women" or "make things worse" seems irrelevant to me. In fact, female violence that only hurts women is perfectly acceptable. Women have always been given the dirty work of disciplining their daughters into women's place, whether this meant binding little girls' feet or blaming and beating them for being raped. Today, a "feminist community" which claims to find violence of all kinds distasteful is still able to find lesbian sadomasochism sexy and chic. Images of women hurting other women are widely accepted even where images of men hurting women are criticized.

Now, I am not particularly attracted to images of anyone being hurt, period. But I see potential value in fiction and film on the theme of women taking violent means of vengeance on rapists and femicides. One benefit is the assertion of female personal honour; another, quite frankly, is the shock value. Those who are appalled by the idea of vigilante women hunting down men should be asking themselves what they are doing about this world where images of men hunting down, overpowering, and hurting women surround us. If violence is so terribly wrong when committed by women, then damn it, it is as terribly wrong when committed by men.

Let's face it, we still live in a

world and a century in which a woman who walks (mistake) in the wrong part of town (oh dear) after dark (uh oh) alone (a big no-no) will be blamed by all and sundry if she is raped. People will ask what she expected, doing a fool thing like that.

It's interesting–amusing in a bitter kind of way–maybe even liberating–to envision a slightly different world. The man limps into the emergency room with one ear half-torn off and multiple bruises. As he gasps out his story, the doctor shakes his head: "You mean you grabbed at her breasts and tried to pull her into your car? Well I mean, dummy, what did you expect?" And he gets no sympathy, not a shred, from anyone.

If women become more violent, will the world be a more violent place? Perhaps, but it's not a simple equation of addition. We will have to subtract any violence that women prevent. So we will have to subtract a large number of rapes and daily humiliations suffered by women who today cannot or will not defend themselves. We might have to subtract six or seven murders that would have been committed by a latter-day Zodiac Killer, except that his first intended victim killed him instead. Suppose one of the women in the lecture hall in Montreal had been armed, and skilled enough to take out Marc Lepine before he mowed down fourteen of her classmates . . .

It's not as if we were suggesting that women introduce violence into the Garden of Eden. The war is already on. Women and children are steadily losing it.

And women are already violent. Women take out the anger and frustration of women's place, and the memory of their own humiliations and defeats, on each other and on their kids, on their own bodies. Would we rather that incest survivors mutilate themselves, commit suicide, abuse their own children--or go and do something dreadful to Daddy? We don't know for sure that doing something dreadful to Daddy will heal a wounded soul, but it does seem more appropriate than doing dreadful things to oneself or any innocent bystander.

And one last great myth: "Violence never solves anything."

In the grand philosophical sense those words may ring true. Violence is like money: it can't make you happy, save your soul, make you a better person–but it certainly can solve things. When the winners exterminate the losers, historical conflicts are permanently solved. Many a high-ranking criminal has lived to a comfortable and respected old age only because a few pesky witnesses were no longer alive to testify. Many a dissatisfied husband has got rid of an unwanted wife. More women than we know have probably got rid of abusive husbands.

Violence definitely solves some things. A dead rapist will not commit any more rapes: he's been solved. Violence is a seductive solution because it seems easy and quick; violence is a glamorous commercial property in our time; violence is a tool, an addiction, a sin, a desperate resort, a hobby, depending on where you look and who you ask.

I am not here to lay out a list of easy answers, but a tangle of difficult questions. Violence may be a tool and a tactic that feminists should use; certainly we ought to be putting some serious thought into it. If we refuse It should not be because it offends against our romantic notion of morally superior Womanhood, but for some better and more thoughtful reason. If we accept it, we had better figure out how to avoid becoming corrupted by it.

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 work- 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 'strip- ping 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 (Nation- alist 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 burgeon- ing women's movement. The Kuomintang suppressed Women's Associations, arrest- ing, 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

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, busi- 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).

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

WHERE ABOLITION MEETS ACTION

by Victoria Law

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 alter- native 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 account- ability 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. 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 (Story Telling 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 1970's: 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