

Alternative interventions to violence: Creative interventions

By Mimi Kim

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Are the solutions to violence against women and children to be found via state interventions – through the police, prosecution and imprisonment? Or are alternative, grassroots, community-based responses required? These are questions being asked by many women of colour in the USA. Creative Interventions is an organisation based in Oakland, California, which seeks to empower families and communities to resolve family, intimate partner and other forms of interpersonal violence. It is hoped that this piece will spark conversations about ways of supporting community initiatives to address violence against women. Practitioners and community members working on similar issues in other countries are invited to contribute their ideas and stories.

Keywords: violence against women, community interventions, prevention, communities of colour, state violence

ANTI-VIOLENCE MOVEMENT IN THE U.S.

My involvement in exploring creative interventions in relation to violence against women and children has a particular history. It is linked to two pathways – the work of social justice movements in the U.S. that have been led by people of colour¹ to address the concerns of our communities, and years of anti-violence work, primarily within Asian American immigrant communities.

These pathways of social justice movements and the anti-violence movement have not always run a parallel course. The anti-violence movement in the U.S. has strayed from the grassroots and radical origins of its nascent years in the 1970s. Indeed, many would say that this can no longer be called a movement, but rather a human service sector which has professionalised and legitimised itself into a provider of social service rather than as an agent of social change.

Throughout the 1980s and, particularly, the 1990s, government funding of anti-violence organisations in the U.S. increased significantly. This funding was often tied to collaboration with the police, prosecutors or promotion of pro-arrest policies. This funding trend both reflects and promotes the increasing reliance upon criminal legal interventions for domestic and sexual violence. As a long-time worker in anti-violence organisations, I witnessed this increase in federal and state funding, celebrated the availability of much-needed resources, and also came to recognise the short-term and long-term consequences these developments would have upon the very movement which fostered these gains.

During the ten years I worked within the Asian Women's Shelter with women who had been subjected to interpersonal violence, I embraced three key beliefs/principles of the mainstream anti-violence movement in the U.S.:

- that victims are a class of people distinct from perpetrators;
- that change for perpetrators is unlikely and, more often than not, not worth the effort; and
- that engagement with perpetrators is dangerous and therefore best left to the state.

While I understand the evolution of these beliefs/principles and am all too familiar with the victim-blaming, anti-woman myths from which these were a welcome departure, I also saw us walk into another sort of trap.

While the anti-violence movement originally challenged patriarchy within the family and the patriarchal state which protected it, successful attempts to lobby changes to state policies and practices led to a shift towards a collaborative relationship. Furthermore, the anti-violence movement was primarily led by white women (who were becoming increasingly professionalised) who experienced this shift in relationship with the state as beneficial to abused women and children as well as to their organisations which gained legitimacy and, in some cases, increased funding due to this improved relationship. While the positions of women of colour with regard to this shift can in no way be described as homogeneous, women of colour have been much more likely to challenge this relationship between the anti-violence movement and the state.

In recent years, this challenge has escalated with the alarming rise in rates of incarceration particularly among people of colour. Likewise, increasing anti-immigrant sentiment and policies in the U.S. have contributed to concern over the pro-criminalisation approach supported by anti-violence advocates and the state. Many of us, already wary of the pro-arrest recommendations often offered to women seeking assistance from our own organisations, were particularly struck by earlier compromises represented in the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994. This important act was the first piece of federal legislation regarding violence against women in the U.S. and the result of years of struggle from anti-violence and immigrant rights advocates. Among other measures, its passage led to significant increases in federal funding available to anti-violence organisations and allowed for critical gains for immigrant women facing domestic violence from their U.S. citizen or legal resident spouses. These were outcomes we all celebrated.

At the same time, however, VAWA was passed as a section of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (1994 Crime Bill), the bill backed by President Clinton which significantly increased prison construction and legislated 'three

strikes you're out' – a mandate for automatic long-term sentencing for anyone convicted of three felony offenses. For many of us, this compromise symbolised the untenable position the mainstream anti-violence movement had reached with regard to the state and its embrace of criminalisation as a primary intervention response.

On the ground, women experiencing domestic violence had been encouraged to seek safety through our services. Our help lines often advised women to call the police. When women reached our phone lines after hours, they were told to call 911 (the dial code for the police) in case of emergency. While we were often skeptical of the response they might actually receive and spent time instructing women on how best to manage a police response, we failed to think of an alternative way to protect women and children and engage perpetrators of abuse.

Safety, we believed, was paramount. And safety was defined as devising a plan to leave the abuser and engage the police if necessary. Of course, we knew that women more often than not did not leave the relationships or when they left, they often returned at a later date. This is common for anyone involved in an abusive relationship. But for women in immigrant communities and communities of colour there are additional concerns. For instance, the fear of an abusive partner may be matched by fear of the police. Immigrant women want violence to end, but they do not necessarily want their partner arrested, nor to go to a shelter, nor to leave their homes. Those concerned about their immigration status also risk exposure to deportation for themselves, their children and for their abusive partners.

For those involved in abusive same-gender relationships or for the lesbian/gay/bi-sexual/transgender or queer community, fears in relation to the police or state involvement are heightened by knowledge that most conventional anti-violence programs will fail to understand them and their situations. Few anti-violence advocacy services actively target the queer community or have effective anti-homophobia policies and practices. And police response towards the queer community is known to range from insensitivity to brutal violence.

While advocate-led trainings about domestic violence, and the experience of immigrant communities and queer communities may have

mitigated some of the most egregious aspects of police response and positively changed policies and practices within some parts of the criminal legal system, the system remains one based on separation, punishment, state definitions of crimes, and state control. Embedded in a criminal legal system which purports 'blind' justice remain deep biases based upon class, race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, nationality, religion, and physical and mental ability which permeate the system on all levels. Since 9/11, changes in laws, policies and practices have had devastating effects on already oppressed groups.

Even the most ardent supporters of the current anti-violence intervention approach in the U.S. will admit these limitations. However, many fail to see an alternative. The basic assumptions that the best way to achieve safety is through the survivor leaving an abusive relationship and the best way to engage a perpetrator is through the criminal legal system remain. Other options are deemed too dangerous, too subject to the manipulation of the perpetrator, or simply unimaginable.

In recent years, those raising a critique of state interventions and demanding new alternative responses to challenge intimate violence and state violence have coalesced into a vocal and powerful force. In 2000, an organisation called Incite! Women of Color Against Violence was formed during the Color of Violence conference in Santa Cruz to name and respond to the complex intersection of forms of oppression facing women of colour and communities of colour. This organisation has continued to articulate a new analysis of violence while creating spaces for alternative responses.

Incite! and Critical Resistance, a multi-racial national organisation challenging the prison-industrial-complex, created a joint statement which acknowledged the uncharted territory between those trying to address state violence associated with prisons, and those in the anti-violence movement trying to address interpersonal violence against women and children. The preamble to the 'Critical Resistance – Incite! statement on gender violence and the prison industrial complex' articulates a joint commitment to work together:

We call social justice movements to develop strategies and analysis that address both state AND interpersonal violence, particularly

violence against women. Currently, activists/movements that address state violence (such as anti-prison, anti-police brutality groups) often work in isolation from activists/movements that address domestic and sexual violence. The result is that women of color, who suffer disproportionately from both state and interpersonal violence, have become marginalised within these movements. It is critical that we develop responses to gender violence that do not depend on a sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic criminal justice system. It is also important that we develop strategies that challenge the criminal justice system and that also provide safety for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. To live violence free-lives, we must develop holistic strategies for addressing violence that speak to the intersection of all forms of oppression. (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2006, p.223)

COMMUNITIES AS SPACES OF POSSIBILITY

Many of us within oppressed communities seek safety within the same collective spaces which hold those who perpetrate violence against us. Leaving violent situations may not seem possible because of potential persecution from those around us, not only abusive partners but family, faith communities, friends, community members, and leaders. These are attitudes which many of us in the anti-violence community are challenging in order to make it possible for those who have been subjected to violence to speak out about this, and to be embraced and supported rather than shunned or blamed. Leaving violent contexts may also expose us to new vulnerabilities, some of which may in the long run be less safe than the homes and communities from which we escape, i.e., poverty, racism, exposure to deportation, religious persecution, language barriers, cultural barriers, homophobia, transphobia and so on. As anti-violence advocates and those committed to wider social justice, we are doing all we can to change these conditions.

However, despite conditions of violence, communities also offer multiple forms of safety: emotional safety; material resources; security of home and family; shared language, culture, history

and religion; sense of belonging; and so on. These are important to most human beings. For members of oppressed communities, however, these are particularly scarce resources which may only be accessible within the sacred pockets of our intimate spaces. How can these treasures be salvaged? How can the positive benefits of community be nurtured? And, in situations of intimate violence, how can we rely upon these very community resources to lead the way towards safety and accountability – and not simply rely upon outside systems to ‘pull us out of danger’ by removing us or those from within our communities who violate us?

The shortcomings of currently available intervention options and the need to develop new models for community-based responses to violence became painfully clear to me as I faced the violence in the relationship of my own long-time friends. When I learned what was happening, my instinct was to gather a collective group of our community together to form a system of response not only to support the survivor but also to engage her abusive partner. My professional training told me that this would be too dangerous. Going to a shelter, seeking refuge at a friend’s home, calling the police – these were all familiar suggestions which were rejected outright by my friend. I had worked all these years in the anti-violence movement and, yet, the options we had to offer were so ineffective. This was not because a woman was not ready to make these difficult choices. This was because, for her, these choices were the wrong ones.

CREATING ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTIONS TO VIOLENCE

Despite a growing critique of the limited intervention approaches available, and despite the development of some proposed alternative frameworks (Generation Five, forthcoming; Incite! Women of Color against Violence 2005; Kim 2002; Mills 2003), on-the-ground implementation of alternative responses to violence in the U.S. has been surprisingly lacking. Restorative justice applications to intimate forms of violence have been attempted in only a few places (Bazemore & Earle 2002; Blagg 2002; Coker 1999, 2002; Kelly 2002; Pennell & Anderson 2005; Pranis 2002; Stubbs 1997, 2002), and most have been closely tied to the criminal legal system. Some anti-violence

organisations have prioritised community organising over a social service model (Asian and Pacific Islander Women & Family Safety Center 2001; Bhattacharjee 1997; Close to Home 2003; Das Dasgupta 2002; Fullwood 2002; Kim 2005; Mitchell-Clark & Autry 2004), but few have engaged the community to take a more active role in actually intervening in violence.

After researching existing programs and participating in local and national discussions confirming the need for alternative options, I decided to form an independent organisation from which to nurture these alternative community-based interventions to violence. In 2004, with the support and inspiration of long-time visionaries in the anti-violence movement, I established Creative Interventions in Oakland, California. I also knew of a handful of local and national anti-violence organisations which would be willing to work together collaboratively to explore these alternative options but which individually lacked the institutional resources to develop them².

Creative Interventions begins with the assumption that those closest to and most impacted by violence have the greatest motivation to end that violence, i.e., survivors, friends, family and community members. And as these are often the people to whom survivors first turn, they are in a position to offer the most accessible and culturally-appropriate assistance at the earliest stages of violence. It also assumes that the intimate network is often already engaged with the perpetrator and may be in the best position to leverage their authority and connection to demand and support change. Thus the key to community-based interventions is not outside systems, but rather the intimate network. The missing pieces are the framework, knowledge, and resources to equip these intimate networks to offer effective, ethical, and sustainable intervention options.

CREATING NEW KNOWLEDGE TO SUPPORT ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTIONS

The first project of Creative Interventions is a documentation project called the 'National Story Collecting Project' which gathers stories from everyday people on successful and not-so-successful community-based interventions to violence. We have

become so conditioned to think of our current system of shelters, police, and professional intervention programs for those who are violent, that many of us cannot even imagine what a community-based intervention would look like. Yet, I have found that when any group has discussed the topic, people invariably think of efforts that they or others have carried out. 'Oh yes, I remember that my cousin and his friends helped this girl who was being beaten up by her dad. They went to his house and told him that they knew what was happening and he'd better not do it again.' Stories like these contain rich information regarding community-based interventions. What we need to do is to recognise the value of these stories, seek them out, and then rigorously explore these often hidden stories for more information:

- Who decided to start the intervention?
- Why did you do this?
- Why then? What made you know that this was the time to do this?
- How did you decide to move forward?
- What skills were involved in taking this action?
- How did you learn how to do this?
- Who else did you involve?
- What effects did this have?
- Did it reduce or end the violence?
- How?
- What did you learn from this process?
- What advice would you give to others who are in a similar situation?

If these stories of courageous acts of everyday people can be collected in one place, documented, analysed and then turned back to our communities, what further community interventions will be inspired?

Creative Interventions will also add to community knowledge through a second project, the 'Community-Based Intervention Project', which seeks to demonstrate ways of creating alternative community-based models of intervention. An alternative model which organises collective responses to violence including support for

survivors, engagement of perpetrators, and education for the community, is currently being developed among partner organisations primarily working within communities of colour, immigrant, and queer communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Upon completion of this pilot project and its evaluation, the model will be documented and disseminated widely.

These are our efforts to create new paradigms and tools to address and prevent violence. This

organisation and its collaborative projects represent just one of many efforts among women of colour in the U.S. to create alternative responses to intimate forms of violence, while at the same time addressing the very real effects of state violence on our communities.

I will end this piece with Barbara's³ story collected through the National Story Collecting Project in order to provide an example of how these stories can inspire and inform.

BARBARA'S STORY

I have three children; the oldest two are boys. I had them when I was still running a rape crisis center and a battered women's program/child sexual abuse program. And I remember panic about having boys: 'How in the world am I going to love boys?' 'Cause in my view, men were responsible for much of what was wrong with the culture, and cultures in general, and that aggression and that violence that we were seeing happen in families and in communities. It was deeply life-transforming to *completely* love – love like I've never loved before – these two little boys. And watch them grow up, and shepherding their growth in a really racist, sexist, screwed-up world. And knowing that you could only do as good of a job as you can do.

When my oldest son was a freshman at high school, he was dying to go to these unsupervised parties that were actually being given by seniors when their parents were out of town. The good news is he was deeply honest and said, 'I really want to go to these parties'. And I'd say, 'No, you can't go to these parties'. And we had a running debate for half of the year.

He kept saying, 'Mom, you know I'm not going to do anything terrible. And you know in yourself that at some point I'm going to experiment, but I'm not going to do more than that. What's the problem?' And I realise, as we talk about it, that the problem was I *knew* that at these parties – at some point – there'd be a young woman who would either have gotten too drunk or too high, or was too confused about the attention and stuff of some powerful senior, to not end up upstairs in a bedroom, and that she would be raped. And I *knew* – I had no question – that my son would not be the person to do that. I had not an iota of doubt or worry.

But I couldn't bear the idea that he would be there and not stop it. And that he'd be part of a problem by not being able to stop it. So I said, 'You're not going to be the problem. But somebody else is. And I don't know how I could bear you being present. So the only way you can go to this unsupervised party is if you can role-play with me – if you can strategise with me – what you're going to do, because you *have* to be able to stop it. And if that means putting your body in the way, or if it means calling the police and dealing with whatever trouble you might get for calling the authorities on the older boys, or gathering a group of your friends together to stop it in some way ... you *have* to ... I have to know that you will not allow it to happen because being on the side and not doing it yourself is not enough. You've got to be an active part of the solution'. And we had long talks about this.

We talked through what he would do, how he would feel, what he would do if he had to call the police – how before he did it he'd have to know the address, he'd have to know how to describe it, he'd have to be willing to be there when they came so that they weren't turned away at the door ... There were a million details that we had to walk through in order for me to feel confident. And in the end, right near the end of freshman year, he convinced me that he would be strong enough. And that whatever it was – if

it took getting a posse of his friends together to stand in the way, if it meant personally, if it meant grabbing the girl and running off and getting her to safety – that he would do it. That was our agreement.

And then, I think it was a week before his senior graduation, he came to me one day and said, ‘Mom, do you remember those discussions we had my freshman year?’ And I said, ‘You mean about the parties?’ And he said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘Mom, I did it.’ I said, ‘What are you saying?’ And he said, ‘There was a party I was at and six guys led a girl upstairs and I watched that. And I ran upstairs and I stood in the doorway. And I grabbed her hand and I ran downstairs with her, and I told those young men they had to get out. And I took her home. And she was okay’. And he didn’t cry when he told me.

And actually, later that day, a girlfriend of his, and I don’t know if she was the girl, or if she just knew the girl ... she came to me and said, ‘Barbara, do you know what your son did?’ And I said, ‘You mean at the party?’ And she said, ‘Yes. He saved this girl.’ And she said, ‘Barbara, you should be really proud.’

So, anyway ... So I think it’s possible. You can raise boys. And it’s important to raise them and know they won’t do it. But it’s just as important for them not to be bystanders – to raise them to be courageous and to have them understand that their job is far more than that; they have to stop it.

AN INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE YOUR OWN STORIES

If you know of stories of grassroots community initiatives to address violence, Creative Interventions would be delighted to hear from you! Please contact us c/o stories@creative-interventions.org.

NOTES

- ¹ ‘People of colour’ is a term popularised among progressive sectors in the U.S. in the 1990s to refer to non-white populations. The term denotes some level of collective unity or solidarity among non-white people.
- ² These organisations include Generation Five, a San Francisco-based national organisation committed to ending child sexual abuse through community organising and leadership development, and local immigrant-specific domestic violence programs including Shimtuh in the Korean community, Narika, which works in the South Asian community, and Asian Women’s Shelter, a pan-Asian battered women’s shelter which has been particularly interested in looking at alternatives for the Asian and Pacific Islander queer community. Other affiliated organisations include prison abolitionist organisations in the Bay Area including Critical Resistance and Justice Now, the latter organisation advocating for women in prison, and DataCenter, a social justice research centre.
- ³ Barbara gave permission for her first name to be shared publicly.

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Warmly,

*Cheryl White & David Denborough
on behalf of Dulwich Centre Publications*

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