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## Salvage: Gendered Violence in Activist Communities

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SALVAGE

Gendered Violence in  
activist communities



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# S u m m a r y

How to best deal with sexual violence in radical social movements is a contentious issue in the UK Left. The persistence of and inability to deal with sexual violence contradicts the core values of equality and social justice at the heart of radical social movements. A legacy of being marginalised and subjected to state repression and scrutiny has led radical activist communities to develop important self-protective strategies to establish trust and belonging. Safer spaces policies, transformative justice and community accountability processes have been attempted to address gendered violence without recourse to the state. Debate has focused on the effectiveness and negative impacts of these interventions often at the expense of survivors and anti-violence activists. However, safer spaces policies and accountability processes are set up to fail without a critical exploration of wider power relations and self-protective cultural practices that already frame activist communities.

We chose to develop knowledge and understanding about gendered violence in activist communities from the perspectives and experiences of survivors. Between August 2015 and January 2016 we interviewed 10 survivors who had experienced sexual violence within a range of different activist groups and communities across the UK. These accounts map out how layers of silence and denial can work in activist groups and communities to allow and maintain violence, abuse and harm. There was little evidence of a 'one size fits all' solution. Instead there is a need to better recognise how intersections of cissexism, homophobia, classism, racism, sexism and ableism shape survivors' experiences and meanings of harm, available resources and solutions, and impacts of harm on individuals and communities. Understanding what can produce a 'conducive context' for sexual violence against women, transgender and non-binary individuals in activism offers crucial clues in how we can undo these harms. Progressive change requires no less than a reconceptualisation of culture that recognises

violence as embedded in an ongoing struggle for power and control of activist arenas.

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank: all the survivors who got in touch with us and shared their experiences with us, the survivors, activists and allies in our working group, and those who helped our call out reach far and wide. The Harm and Evidence Research Collaborative at The Open University and the Feminist Review Trust for recognising and supporting our work. The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies for hosting our launch event, The Open University at Camden for providing free meeting space, and the European Group for Deviance and Social Control for being a crucial space and network for critical discussion and friendship. None of this thinking has happened in isolation and we want to thank all those who have contacted us, contributed in workshops, asked us difficult questions and been so generous with their thoughts and experiences. Particular thanks go to Lindsay Draws for her artwork and Bryony Beynon for being the best cheerleader.

Salvage Research Collective  
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## **B a c k g r o u n d**

In social justice movements we often encounter the force of the state who seek to quash radical dissent. The police, as agents of the state, are called on to contain and disperse demonstrations and protest camps, infiltrate and surveil our movements, profile activists, evict and shut down occupations (Cunningham & Noakes 2008; Lubbers 2012; Jones 2013; Undercover Research Group). The exposure of Mark Kennedy as an undercover police officer, active within UK environmental and social justice campaigns between 2003-2010, revealed the extent of covert state power and harmed many in the activist community (Jones 2013). State abuses of power towards activists can take a distinctly gendered approach. Women activists are at an increased risk of sexual violence from the police. For instance, a recent report on the policing of the anti-fracking Barton Moss Community Protection Camp identified the use of sexual violence against female protesters by police officers (Gilmore, Jackson & Monk 2016). In addition, the ongoing campaign Police Spies Out of Lives has questioned the legitimacy of policing practices in which undercover police deceive women into long term intimate relationships in order to successfully infiltrate environmental and social justice campaign groups across the UK.

We also know that structural and state violence targets working class, black and minority ethnic, sex workers and LGBTQ communities who are disproportionately subjected to surveillance, policing and imprisonment (Davis 2003; Bibbings 2009; Spade 2011; Stanley & Smith 2011; Mogul, Ritchie & Whitelock 2011; Price 2012; Chateauvert 2013). The Prison Industrial Complex, a concept used to describe the relationship between criminal justice agencies, such as prisons, probation, the police and courts, and private companies who make profit from transporting, feeding and monitoring prisoners (Davis 2003; Empty Cages Collective), means that in practice criminal justice agencies do not reduce harm or provide protection but can actually exacerbate the poverty and violence that marginalised communities are living with. Many activists and academics are passionate about building alternatives to the criminal justice system that can genuinely

reduce harm and tackle the root causes of social problems (e.g. Reclaim Justice Network; Moore et al 2014).

The inability of the criminal justice system to reduce rape and sexual assault and make women's lives safer has been a key concern of feminist academics, practitioners and activists. Multiple failures have been identified including: widespread under-reporting of rape and sexual assault, poor professional practices, 'no-criming' and attrition of cases, and low conviction rates (McMillan 2013, 2016; McMillan & White 2015). Anti-racist and queer critics have questioned the impact of a 'carceral feminist' approach, that advocates reforming and expanding the criminal justice system to address violence against women and LGBTQ individuals (Peterson 1999; Price 2012; Spade & Willse 2014). From this perspective prisons and police are not the solutions to sexual violence but can actually be the abusers and spaces of violence. The violence of criminal justice system can exacerbate harm and leave women caught up in a criminal justice response that neither challenges the enduring realities of living with violence or offers them any meaningful sense of justice. Furthermore, entanglements between the interests of feminist and LGBTQ anti-violence movements with the state and criminal justice system have been questioned (Peterson 1999; Lambie 2013). In practice, these entanglements can position the state as a crucial source of funding leaving independent domestic violence and sexual violence support services vulnerable to regulation, professionalisation and closure. For instance, since the economic crisis of 2008/09 the Conservative-led government has rolled out severe cuts to public funding. This has resulted in the closure of 32 domestic violence refuges and a situation in which 1 in 3 women are being turned away from support (Sisters Uncut). The argument that the lives of women living with violence and poverty in the UK have been made worse is supported by research that has found an increase of gendered violence that coincides with the 2008/09 economic crisis (Walby, Towers & Francis 2015).

Taking all this into account it is common that powerful state actors and outsiders are named as abusive and harmful to activist groups, organisations and communities. Less talked about or understood is the

sexual violence that operates within activist groups and communities. The violence and abuse we can experience from those we trust as friends, partners, allies and comrades. Whilst there is some research that has highlighted the harmful reproduction of gender, race and class norms and exclusions in social justice movements (Coleman & Bassi 2012; Emejulu & Bassi 2015). There has been very little research done on the experiences of sexual violence survivors in activist communities.

In one article, Sara Koopman (2007) recalled how the activist community at the fifth World Social Forum based in Porto Alegre during January 2005 responded to rumours of rapes on the youth camp. Reports of up to 90 rapes at a vigil on day 5 of the camp led to a women's march through the camp. The women's march was subjected to harassment by men at the camp who eventually carried out their own 'sexual liberation' march in which many men chose to march naked. Koopman was stunned at the lack of response to sexual violence and the erasure of events from public documentation. Similar reports of sexual violence and inappropriate responses have been reported at Occupy camps in the US and UK (Wänggren & Milatovic 2012) and several high-profile activists (e.g. Julian Assange, Martin Smith and Steve Hedley) have been named as abusers by women activists. However, the problem of sexual violence is denied and silenced whilst survivors face harassment, disbelief and no other choice but to leave the movement.

There is, thankfully, extensive documentation and discussion of alternatives to the criminal justice system to address gendered violence based in North America. The publication of *The Revolution Starts at Home* (Chin-In, Dulani & Piepzna-Samarasinha 2011) brought the issue of gendered violence in activist communities to widespread attention. This volume contains individual and group accounts of experiencing and dealing with gendered violence within activist groups and organisations without recourse to the police and statutory agencies. Long-standing alternatives known as 'transformative justice' and 'community accountability' processes have been developed and used by black, LGBTQ and indigenous communities (Law 2011;

Zellerer 1999). Extensive documentation of these responses is available from various organisations including: generationFIVE (Kershner et al 2007), inCITE! (2003, 2006), Philly Stands Up (Kelly 2010), Creative Interventions (Kim 2010; Creative Interventions 2012), Communities Against Rape and Abuse (Bierria et al 2011), NorthWest Network (Burk, Al-Aswad Dilsi & Crager 2013). To date, researchers have tended to explore what lessons can be learned from the ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ of alternative responses drawing primarily on the perspectives of anti-violence activist facilitators (Caulfield 2013).

We view our research project as sitting within these entangled discussions about: state control of social movements, prison abolitionism and critiques of the prison industrial complex, the intersections of violence with structures of gender, race, class and sexuality, and alternative models of ‘transformative justice’ and ‘community accountability’. In solidarity with feminist work and protest of the institutional silencing of sexual violence in UK Universities (Ahmed 2016; Phipps 2015) there is an urgent need for solutions to address ongoing sexual violence in and across our critical spaces. This is particularly urgent as abusers can and do cross over activist and academic worlds. However, policies and responses are set up to fail without in-depth and critical interrogation of self-protective cultures, denials and power relations that allow and maintain violence, abuse and harm in activist communities and groups. We aim to focus on the contexts and complexities in which both harms and alternative interventions take place; to develop better understandings of how violence, abuse and harm operates in activist communities by putting survivors at the centre.

## **Note on terms used**

In this report we have chosen to use the term **survivor** to describe the person experiencing violence, as opposed to victim in order to acknowledge the agency and capacity of people who live with violence. We have chosen to use the term **abuser** rather than perpetrator to avoid language that is used by the criminal justice system and we

decided against using person who caused/is causing harm to be more economic with our words.

We use the terms **violence**, **abuse**, and **harm** to refer to a range of acts and behaviours that are described by survivors that fit on a continuum of everyday harassment and intrusions to criminalised forms of sexual violence including sexual assault and rape. We question the process of criminalisation that can reduce complex social problems to the identification and punishment of individual ‘criminals’. Many harms we experience, such as poverty and growing inequalities, are not defined as crimes, and the further harm that the crime control industry can inflict needs to be fully considered (see Dorling et al 2008). Wherever possible we have used the exact terms used by the survivor to describe their experiences.

As a research project and activist collective we are inclusive of transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary survivors. We use the term **transgender** as an umbrella term that includes diverse genders that are more fluid or differ from the gender a person was assigned with at birth including: transgender women, transgender men, gender-queer, gender non-conforming, non-binary, bi-gendered, transsexual, agender and intersex. This can be used alongside the term **cisgender**, which refers to people whose gender matches the gender they were assigned with at birth. **Non-binary** genders refer to individuals whose gender does not correspond to the masculine or the feminine side of the gender binary. However, some non-binary genders can correspond to both sides or be fluid and include masculine and/or feminine components.

Various writers and activists have used terms such as ‘gender self-determination’ or ‘self-identification’ to talk about collective work to ‘create the most space for people to express whatever gender they choose at any given moment’ (Stanley & Smith 2011, p. 5). However, the survivors we spoke to told us about how a prefix like ‘self-identified’ or ‘cisgender’ creates a divide that permits transgender people to have a gender identity rather than a real gender. In this sense transgender genders are not freely chosen but in part determined through wider

structures of power, as a transgender woman survivor put it 'I didn't choose this, no one would. I don't get to choose my gender; you might say it chose me?'. We are also mindful of readers of all genders who will want information about transgender and non-binary survivors in order to understand how this shapes experiences of violence, abuse and harm. To allow for this we have avoided using terms such as self-identified, self-determined, cisgender and gender identity to introduce survivors in this report and we have used the pronouns and gender that survivors described themselves as. This includes eight women, one transgender woman ('Anna') and one non-binary person ('Micah') whose gender does not correspond to a man or a woman.

## **O u r R e s e a r c h P r o c e s s**

The Salvage collective started in November 2014 to bring together women, transgender and non-binary individuals who experience gender oppression, violence and abuse in activist communities. To provide a network to share experiences, resources, skills and build communities of belief, support and action.<sup>1</sup> The need for collective action emerged from discussions at workshops that we facilitated at AFem, an international anarcho-feminist conference, and LaDIYfest Sheffield, a grassroots feminist and LGBTQ festival during 2014.<sup>2</sup> There was a distinct need for a better understanding of what sexual violence looks and feels like in activism starting from the lived experiences of survivors as well as an urgent need for action and solutions. A smaller group (three of us) decided to do a small-scale research project to create space to listen to survivors and explore what it is about activist groups and communities that can allow and maintain violence, abuse and harm. We hoped that by co-creating this

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<sup>1</sup> More information at the Project Salvage blog  
<https://projectsalvage.wordpress.com>

<sup>2</sup> 'Victim-Survivor led Challenges to Violence and Abuse in our Communities' and 'Accountability Processes' 19 October 2014, Queen Mary's University <https://afem2014.wordpress.com>; 'Gendered Abuse & Violence in Radical Activist Communities', 29 November 2014, Quaker Meeting House, <https://ladiyfestsheffield.wordpress.com>



knowledge and opening up space for discussion various communities would be better placed to recognise and take action to challenge sexual violence in activist spaces and groups.

The overarching aim of our research project was to explore experiences of gendered violence, abuse and harm from the perspectives of survivors in the radical activist milieu of the UK. More specifically we wanted to know more about how survivors:

- Make sense of their own experience(s) of harm
- Talk about the impact of harm on their political participation and everyday life
- Think and feel about available options and responses to address the harm they have experienced
- Reflect on the character of social justice movements in light of their experiences of harm

We also asked each survivor what they wanted to see come out of the research project. We drew on what is known as a 'participatory action research' approach that involves 'a collaborative process of research, education and action explicitly orientated towards social transformation' (Kendon, Pain & Kesby 2009, p. 90). This enabled us to work collaboratively as a broader coalition of survivors, activists and researchers. We wanted to co-construct knowledge with survivors that would be useful. Whilst one of us has an academic job<sup>3</sup>, this project was explicitly grounded in activism, which served as a compass to guide the decisions we made throughout the research process. However, in order to acknowledge important differences in commitment, skills, time, financial security and resources within the research collective we created a joint working accountability agreement to clarify our working relationships. Our approach has been discussed as an example of 'research justice' (Cooper 2016) in that we pursued our own research agenda as a low-cost DIY research project to

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Downes is a Lecturer in Criminology at The Open University. More info available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/people/jd23778>

generate our own knowledge to primarily benefit the activist communities we are a part of.

We took issues of safety, confidentiality and ethics very seriously and engaged with the established ethical review process of social science research projects with human participants at higher education institutions. We gained ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Open University to do semi-structured interviews with up to 15 sexual violence survivors. This involved providing accessible information about the research project as an information sheet and asking survivors to complete an informed consent form before the interview. Given that some survivors may be living in situations of ongoing violence we developed a safety protocol, a first contact procedure (to make sure all survivors were contacted safely and in ways of their choosing) and a support services information and resources sheet (to signpost survivors to support if they needed it).<sup>4</sup> Survivors did not have to sign the consent form using their real name and no documentation was passed on if it was not safe to do so. All interviews were done in a place that was private, safe and comfortable and at a time and date of the survivor's choosing. If safe to do so, we emailed the interview questions to the survivor in advance to allow them to prepare. All the interviews were audio recorded and anonymised during transcription. All transcripts were emailed to the survivor to check it for accuracy and to make sure that it did not contain any information that could personally identify them. We have used pseudonyms for all participants. All survivors were invited to join the working group and were encouraged to take part as much or as little as they wished in future meetings and communications. The research collective signed a confidentiality agreement to consolidate and demonstrate our commitment to keeping all transcripts, data and

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<sup>4</sup> All of our fieldwork materials (information sheet, flyers, informed consent form, support services and information sheet, joint working accountability agreement and research team confidentiality agreement) are available to view and download at <https://projectsalvage.wordpress.com/research>. We are happy to share our Safety Protocol on request.

recordings safe and not share or discuss the content of the interviews outside the research collective.<sup>5</sup>

The interviews generated 243 pages of transcript. We carried out the analysis of the transcripts as a collective. In this process we all read each interview, developed and discussed themes at research collective meetings. We continued to discuss until we got to four main themes. We held two preliminary results discussion meetings (Sheffield and London) in April 2016 with survivors, activists and partners across the country to discuss these themes. Based on the feedback from these discussions we finalised a coding frame and applied it to the entire dataset using NVivo (computer software designed to help researchers manage large amounts of qualitative data). Due to having dedicated research time to focus on the research project Julia took on the NVivo analysis and initial drafting of the report with Karis and Becka making significant contributions to the final report. The authorship should be considered as collective with author names listed in alphabetical order.

The report has been circulated to the survivors who have taken part for them to check over and approve the quotes that we have used. Although we have made sure that opportunities are open for survivors to be involved in our research process; the ongoing burden of responsibility on survivors to deal with sexual violence within activist communities should also be recognised. In this we made clear that no survivor was expected to participate in additional work if they were unable to at the time and travel expenses and refreshments were

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<sup>5</sup> This project involved the collection of sensitive data about sexual violence from individuals from a small community within a context in which attempts to identify participants is a high risk. This means that this data cannot be made publically accessible and steps have been taken to keep data secure and protect the identities of all survivors. A record of the research data is available: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/46915>. Access to anonymised interview transcripts is available on a restricted access basis for research teams and individuals approved by the research collective and survivors. Research teams and individuals will only be able to access research data on The Open University premises, are not be permitted to copy the data and are required to sign a confidentiality statement.

available for all meetings. We were able to access funds from the Harm and Evidence Research Collaborative to support the preliminary results discussion meetings, pay Becka to design the toolkit and support attendance at a sexual violence workshop facilitation training day.

## **The survivors**

The survivors we interviewed included women, transgender women and non-binary gender activists aged over eighteen who had experienced sexual violence, abuse and harm in the radical left social justice movement community in the UK. They were recruited using what is known as ‘opportunity’ and ‘snowball’ sampling. Put simply, we put out information about the research project on our blog and encouraged survivors who were interested in doing an interview to contact us. We shared this post on Twitter, Facebook and mailing lists. We also created flyers to leave at events and venues and emailed information directly to relevant organisations including activist media sites, radical social centres, campaigns, activist groups and bookshops. Over time the survivors we interviewed recommended the project to other survivors and more survivors got in touch with us.

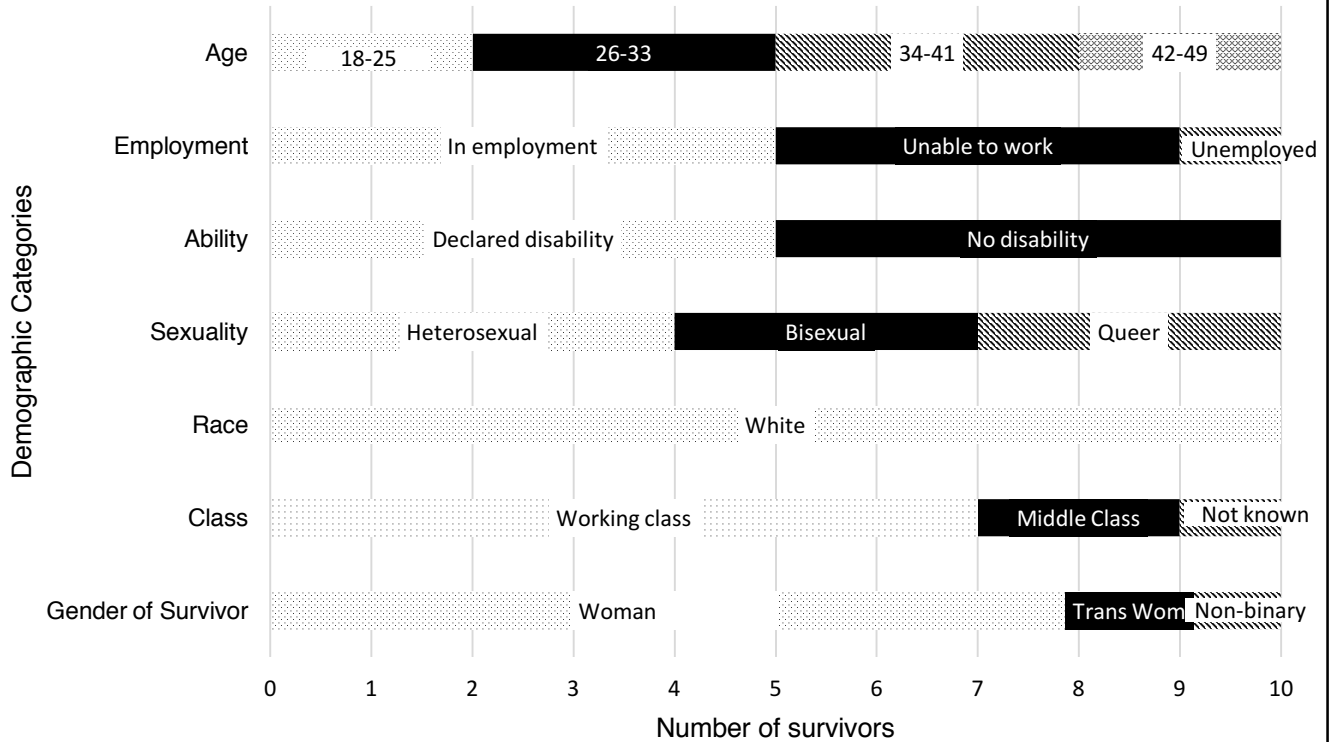
Our call out for survivors was released on 10 August 2015. We initially had lots of interest in the project. For instance, our ‘call out for participants’ blogpost got 996 views, was shared 472 times on Facebook and retweeted 64 times on the first day. This was accompanied by various reactions, some positive who described the project as ‘timely’, ‘inspiring’ and ‘amazing’ and some negative who described us as ‘a Cop or State project to cause division or sew discontent in activist groups. Best ignore’ (posted on Indymedia 10 August 2015). A total of twenty-five people contacted us about the project, nineteen people fit the remit and six people did not or we did not know (this included people contacting us to contest ‘false allegations’ and those who were not ready or did not respond when we contacted them). We interviewed ten survivors and did a partial

interview with one other survivor. This survivor decided to withdraw their interview until further notice, a choice we respected.

As Chart 1 illustrates the majority of survivors were women and/or working class. Half of the sample were living with a disability and half were currently working either part or full time. Just over half were non-heterosexual and described their sexuality as bisexual or queer. However, all the survivors we interviewed were white. This is a limitation of our sample and requires interrogation in relation to the racialised processes of exclusion within radical activist communities, the activist networks in which we circulated our call out and dominant narratives of victimhood.

Sexual violence was not isolated to one particular activist group or social movement organisation. Survivors spoke about experiencing sexual violence across radical social centres, unions, housing cooperatives, protest camps as well as animal rights, environmental, anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, queer, feminist, punk and anarchist groups, movements and communities. The majority of abusers were men (7) however abusers also included 2 women and 1 non-binary transgender woman. Half of the survivors (5) were harmed by somebody they considered a friend, 3 by a current or previous partner and 2 by someone they had an on-off relationship with. Half of the survivors spoke about previous experiences of abuse including child sexual abuse, physical violence and emotional abuse from parents and domestic violence.

# Chart 1: Survivor Demographics



## Key Findings

The discussions we had with survivors enabled us to map some of the complexities and contexts that allow and maintain sexual violence, abuse and harm in activist communities. To explore these layers of silence and denial at work. Whilst it is common to talk about how abusers minimise, deny and blame their abusive behaviour; drawing on concepts of denial and silence in Stan Cohen's (2001) *States of Denial*, Kristie Dotson's (2011) work on epistemic violence, pernicious ignorance and silencing<sup>6</sup>, and Judith Herman's (1992) *Trauma and Recovery* has enabled us to better contextualise the self-protective denials of the powerful (white, cisgender, men, middle class, able-bodied and heterosexual) within activist communities. The projection of a collective ethos of equality, liberation and inclusion was secured through increasingly elaborate denials, inactions and ways to silence survivors alongside shifts in the pattern and character of violence used.

Cohen defines denial as the 'need to be innocent of a troubling recognition' (Cohen 2001, p. 25). This relates to what Dotson terms 'pernicious ignorance', an ignorance that 'causes or contributes to a harmful practice, in this case, a harmful practice of silencing' (2011, p. 239). It is far easier to project a coherent radical vision if a movement can evade responsibility in creating the circumstances for ongoing sexual violence. Despite claims in activist communities to dismantle oppressive hierarchies and practices used in wider society, structural power inequalities persist. The problems of an intrinsic 'structurelessness' in activist groups and organisations has long been recognised by activists (Freeman 1972). In a situation where power is simultaneously enacted, silenced and denied it becomes difficult to challenge abuses of power. Shared implicit rules determine what can and cannot be comfortably acknowledged within an activist community. This can take the form of shared denials that are rarely opened up to

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<sup>6</sup> I was introduced to Kristie Dotson's work in an excellent conference paper by Naomi Beecroft (2016) that applied Dotson's concepts of 'epistemic violence', 'testimonial smothering' and 'testimonial quieting' to understand the dynamics of silencing in rape culture.

scrutiny, as Cohen explains:

These attentional tricks may be shared between people. Indeed, distortions and self-delusions are most often synchronized – within families, intimate relations or organisations. Whole societies have unmentioned and unmentionable rules about what should not be openly talked about. You are subject to a rule about obeying these rules, but bound also by a meta-rule which dictates that you deny your knowledge of the original rule. (Cohen 2001, p. 45)

This is not to claim that activist groups are any different or worse than other groups in society, indeed Cohen is careful to situate denial as a normal social process and Dotson acknowledges that some ignorance is necessary. It is when denial, ignorance and silence cause harm that action and resistance is required. In the UK various cultural institutions including the BBC, political parties, children's homes, youth detention centres and religious organisations, have enabled abusers to commit acts of sexual violence with impunity. However, the rhetoric of self-protective cultural practices and processes of denial and silence are particular to a specific community. In this section of our key findings we critically explore how self-protective cultural practices work to deny and silence sexual violence, abuse and harm in activist communities.



# Part One

## What does violence, abuse and harm look like in activist communities?

The presence of violence within an activist community can be scary and confusing to make sense of. Survivors frequently come up against attitudes and questions such as:

- I don't get it, he only asked her out, it's not like he raped her
- If it happened years ago, why didn't they come forward sooner?
- If they were in a relationship, why didn't they just break up with them?
- How could they stay silent in that situation especially as they say they are a feminist?
- How could they act so 'normal' afterwards?
- But shouldn't they have really reported it to the police?

In this first part of our key findings we address these concerns by drawing on the perspective and experiences of survivors to unpick what violence, abuse and harm can look and feel like within an activist community. Equipping ourselves with a more nuanced understanding of violence, abuse and harm is a crucial first step in helping us to transform our activist communities.

Survivors recounted a wide range of acts and behaviours as violent, abusive and harmful. These experiences went beyond legal definitions of rape and sexual assault. The experiences of survivors were more in line with Liz Kelly's concept of a continuum of sexual violence that defines sexual violence as 'any physical, visual, verbal or sexual act that is experienced by the woman or girl [individual] at the time or later as a threat, invasion or assault that has the effect of hurting her [them] or degrading her [them] and/or takes away her [their] ability to control intimate contact' (1988, p. 41, gender neutral pronouns added). Understood in this way, it is possible to identify and understand diverse

acts of sexual violence in activist communities. However, dominant definitions of sexual violence as discrete physical and visible incidents can obscure the chronic and cumulative patterns of gendered harm in the lives of survivors in activist communities. Crucially structural power inequalities can construct a ‘conducive context’ for sexual violence (see Kelly 2016), a context that allows physical, visual, verbal and sexual acts to be used by the powerful to violate an individual’s right to control intimate contact.

### **“The little things”: Chronic sexism and cumulative patterns of harm**

Many survivors spoke about sexual violence, abuse and harm as consisting of subtle and emotionally manipulative acts and behaviours: ‘the little things’. This made many abuses of power difficult to identify and name, as Collette described ‘I find it really hard because it’s kind of like low level it’s kind of very ... I find it really hard to sort of quantify’. This was even more confusing when abuse included positive praise, gifts and attention. For instance, Leah described how her abuser would ‘say things like “oh you’re my best protégé out of all the activists that we’ve met this year and you’re new to activism” you know really bigging me up and praising me’. However, this behaviour could switch as Leah went on to describe:

He went from being loads to just being ignored [...] Just being so unpredictable. One day he’d be so nice and so lovely and helpful and then the next day he was just a complete git [...] It was just constantly little things just hammering in. Just made me feel rubbish and made me feel worthless and really shit. [...] For days and days and days and it was just awful. I felt really awful and insecure.

It was the little things such as withdrawing eye contact, avoiding any physical contact and sulking that had such a devastating impact on Leah. As nothing was ever said or done overtly by the abuser this was difficult for Leah to make sense of. Erin also described how her abuser used the little things to manipulate and coerce her:

Manipulation doesn't describe something that's visible it describes a really sinister way of communicating and interacting with someone where you coerce them into doing something that benefits you [...] It's built on lies or, it's all the little things and that's what [abuser] would do is all these little things where he would almost not say anything so he hadn't committed to anything it would be like a little look or a little touch your arm it wouldn't be "oh that's really shit" he'd pull a sad face and be like "oooooh" you know so. He's not actually saying "oh that's shit" it's all about what you have interpreted and I think a lot of the time when people are being manipulative it's about interpretation so, they say one thing but it's quite vague and actually they mean something very specific.

Whilst the little things, such as gestures and facial expressions, could be perceived by others as vague and inconsequential they carried very specific meanings for survivors. The switching demeanour and unpredictability of the wants and needs of abusers left some survivors in a chronic state of hypervigilance. For example, Lydia described how 'it was little things that always meant that I had to do the right thing and that led to me really overthinking everything. Am I doing the right thing? Am I wearing the right thing? Am I acting in the right way?'

Sexism was experienced as a chronic condition subtly persisting at a low level within activist spaces and communities. Sexism was rarely considered to be overt or big enough to prioritise above other immediate challenges that activists faced. For instance, Erin explained:

I wouldn't say it's totally totally awful like it's not. It's not all the time or it's not really profound but because it's quite little that means it's even harder to challenge. If you went to a members meeting and there was you know a leak in the roof and the boiler's broken and say "I think we've got a bit of a cultural issue here" [it] doesn't come across to a lot of people as important.

Small acts of exclusion, based on gender, class and ability, can creep into the routine of everyday life in activism and create a 'conducive context' for sexual violence and oppressive practices. Anna connected both subtle and overt acts of sexual violence to the same abusive dynamic of power:

I think I'm trying to be more considerate in that sense, and try to think [about] the different ways [in] which these power imbalances make themselves known. And how abstract and weird those things can be, how difficult to spot they can be. And I suppose micro-aggressions and things like that, demonstrate that it's the little things that can pass you by that you have to become really aware of. They're the things that allow for the awful abuses, it's the gradual erosion of self-worth.

Some survivors were critical of the hierarchy that positioned rape and sexual assault as what Erin termed the 'ultimate call out' or the most harmful behaviour in activist spaces. Some survivors found the subtle, emotional and psychological tactics to be the most harmful for them. For instance, Hayley argued that: 'for me personally other forms of abusive behaviour [have] harmed me more [...] it was horrible and it was really upsetting, all the gas lighting and the criticisms of my performance it turned my brain inside out'. This highlights a need to be aware of diversities in what survivors are affected the most by and how impacts of harm can play out differently in survivors' lives.

## **Sexual entitlements and intimate access**

It is the little things that can go unnoticed and unchallenged that cultivate a 'conducive context' in which abusers can assert sexual entitlements and intimate access to the bodies of others. Power can be so well established that an abuser can merely lean on an expectation of sexual access without saying or doing anything overt. As Leah experienced from her abuser, 'there's no direct, there's nothing, you can't put your finger on it but I knew that I was expected to shag him. Or he expected that I would shag him'. Abusers were also able to

exploit the 'rule-less' ethos of activist spaces to target and negotiate sexual access with survivors when they were at their most vulnerable and therefore less likely to resist and/or be believed and taken seriously. For instance, Beth spoke about her experience of unwanted touching in a queer activist space:

There was one person there who like really pursued me aggressively sexually and were like rubbing up their bodies to me and I had no interest in them whatsoever and it's like. How to describe this I was kind of expected to tolerate it people didn't. Like we'd be standing in a group like in the daytime talking about something and this person would come up to me and rub their body against mine and nobody would say anything. And I was like. I ended up literally like having to push them away. And I sometimes it struck me when I was remembering that it was just like how lonely it felt and how I was supposed to well how I felt I was supposed to just suck it up I suppose.

Grace experienced a male activist making moves on her whilst out on an 'arrestable' action very shortly after she had split up with her boyfriend. Her clear refusal was not seen as good enough and more justification and negotiation was seen as necessary:

When I moved to the occupation, a guy that I'd been friends with for years, kind of tried it on with me and I'd split up with my boyfriend the night before at 3 o'clock in the morning and it was an arrestable action and my head wasn't great anyway. I was a bit annoyed at this and after I was like "no" he was like "let's have a meeting to talk about this" like I owed him an explanation or something.

Breanna described how her abuser physically and verbally sought sexual access to her body when she was drunk, alone and struggling with the traumatic impacts of a previous rape. The abuser used her mental health to position himself as a 'safe' person to help her to overcome her trauma through engaging in sexual activity with him:

So [abuser] kind of comments and says “I’m going to come down and join you” he was quite drunk at that point and it was on the doorstep and he was telling me like “oh you remember years back when I told you if you ever needed a really good fuck just tell me” and I was like “actually I don’t I really don’t I can’t cope with the idea of it I’m really” you know crying and he was really horrible he just was really pushy and physically urghhh all over me not like gropey but urggh enveloping without me asking and he was telling me “oh when you’re a bit mad the sex drive’s the first thing it’s ok” and then did this whole “well what’s the problem because you’re beautiful I don’t understand why you don’t want to be naked you’re beautiful”. I was like “I don’t give a shit what I look like I can’t deal with being touched it makes me think of that man touching me I can’t cope with the idea of anyone wanting to touch me it makes me think of that man touching me” so [abuser] in his wisdom had an idea. About how to make me feel a bit easier about having baths because I couldn’t be naked. He thought it’d be a really good idea if I went up took all my clothes off and waited for him in bed or went to bed with him so I could be naked around someone and it could be safe. And I was like “no [abuser] I don’t want to do that” “well you know you’re going to have to do it sooner or later”. I ended up being very firmly no really upset, he didn’t get it told me again that if I ever want to change my mind and wanted a really good fuck let him know and I went upstairs and I locked my door because he still wanted to come into bed with me and I locked my door so he went to bed with [abuser’s partner] next door.

There was a distinct pattern in survivors’ recollections in which personal information that abusers had gained about survivors’ vulnerabilities could be used to bolster control and amplify harm. For instance, Anna recalled how her abuser took advantage of Anna’s neurodiversity to be as harmful as possible:

Something that this person really likes to do was. I take things very literally and I have a difficult time separating someone's opinion from a fact, especially if it's something about me. I don't know how I come across and I don't really feel that in control of myself all the time. If someone tells me something about myself, I've noticed that I kind of prioritise that a bit, and I think she really knew that, because she was able to plant really negative thoughts very easily.

Collette spoke about how she had previously disclosed her experiences of childhood sexual abuse with her abuser before he began to harass her and how this compounded the harm he had on her: 'the other thing is not that long, like a few months before this, I'd kind of shared with him that I was a survivor like I was abused as a child and I'd gone through counselling and I kind of like shared that with him. [...] I was kind of like quite angry because I was like you know that I'm a survivor so you know this is going to hurt me even more'. This suggests that abusers can seek out survivors with histories of abuse, mental health issues and disabilities and exploit their privilege in 'rule-less' situations to gain sexual access at moments when survivors are at their most vulnerable.

## **Weaponising Feminisms**

Another key theme in the experiences of the survivors we spoke to involved an abuser using a survivor's feminism and/or gender to further harm them. For some this was experienced as a painful decimation of their identity. Living with violence whilst identifying as a feminist was difficult for survivors to negotiate. This often amplified shame, self-blame and silence. For instance, Lydia struggled to reconcile her attraction to masculinity with her feminism, 'I feel almost guilty for liking strength and typical butch traits and I've always really battled with myself thinking how can I be a feminist and still find myself attracted to that strong dominant personality. Was I asking for that?' Likewise, Beth described 'these are huge tensions, these are daily struggles for me.

How can I remain with somebody who is sometimes abusive towards me? How can I do that? How can I be a feminist and do that? I don't have answers to that and this is my life struggle that I'm living with'. Survivors' attachments to feminism and activism were useful tools for abusers to cause severe and long lasting harm. The ways in which her abuser used her feminist identity to harm her have had a long-term impact on Lydia:

The thing that really stood out to me was how he would use my feminism and my activism to humiliate and undermine me. Eventually after about a year he said "god a year ago you used to call yourself a feminist and look what you put up with now" [...] He would really use that to taunt me and say "oh you used to think you were a riot grrr!" and he would use that "oh you used to read those fanzines you used to think you were this you used to think you were that and look at you now" [...] Every day I either think thank god he's not here or I replay a scenario where he said something to me. Times he'd make me you know he'd make me get on my knees and beg, make me get on my knees and say I'm not a feminist you know things like that "you're not a feminist say it say it you're not a feminist". And I replay it over and over.

For transgender and non-binary survivors, cissexism and relationship with feminism provided abusers with additional ways to harm them. For instance, Anna described how her abuser weaponised gender essentialist interpretations of feminism and her experience of child sexual abuse to harm Anna:

[The abuser] took that [feminism] in a really essentialist direction. [She] would always attack me for perceived privileges that I had and stuff, and that made me really question, well, like, where do I even fit inside of gender? Because it feels like it's just been thrust upon me, and I don't feel like this narrative of people with my particular anatomy and chromosomal make up or whatever. I don't



think it's inherent in that. And like yeah, having that really, like, used against you as a weapon. [...] The thing that really hurt about it all was that she said, like, she said that because she was abused as a kid, and that had made her hypersexual, that I was actually abusing her, because I claimed to be such a great feminist, but she was exactly the kind of person that I was claiming to protect'.

Far from being a resource to liberate the self from dominant power relations, feminism and activism could be used to induce shame, self-blame and long-lasting harm.

### **Naming violence, abuse and harm**

The often insidious character and pattern of harm caused many delays in naming violence for survivors. All survivors knew their abusers, either as a friend or as a current or former partner, at the time of their violation. This meant that some survivors had an investment in their abuser, which could include love, admiration, friendship and respect. Abusers can also have a lot of valuable qualities as well as vulnerabilities and complexities. This could mean that some survivors, particularly survivors in long-term relationships, were compelled to care for and protect their abuser from harm, including the harm of being named as an abuser in the community. This could prevent survivors from naming and speaking out about what they had experienced. For instance, Lydia reflected on wanting to protect her abuser: 'I felt really protective I thought if I tell the truth and tell people what he's really like they will cut him off he'll have nothing they'll kick him out of this band they'll you know he won't be able to do gigs or have his music he'll be isolated he'll be ostracized so I spent a lot of time and energy into protecting him'. Lydia felt unable to disclose what was happening to her friends, family and community and instead attempted to protect and support him to work through his issues.

Other survivors reflected on how they struggled with a need to be considered a nice person and please those around them. Experiencing

abuse from trusted people interrupted this, bringing the imperative to be nice into question. For instance, Hayley reflected on how her experiences of harm have meant that she has had to change her character: 'I have really toughened up. My Achilles heel is that like I'm nice so actually life's made worse if someone's does that kind of behaviour to me I'm in conflict then because I don't want to be horrible to someone I want to be nice I want to give people what they want what they need and not be mean and it's been really hard working my way through that'. The imperative to do emotional work and smooth things over can cause a reluctance and delay in naming and speaking out about experiences of harm from those you trust.

Survivors felt pressured to prioritise the good intentions of the abuser and give them the benefit of the doubt over their own reactions. For instance, one survivor with disabilities spoke about taking time to separate out emotional, psychological and physical signs of distress associated with their condition from the trauma of sexual violation. For instance, Micah reflected on their complex process of naming violence:

It kind of took a while like when I woke up in the bed I felt like really fucked up and like I wasn't sure like if I was just really hungover or if like I was triggered rather than something bad actually happening in itself because I've got [disability] and I've had other experiences in the past so I wasn't sure like "oh no I've been triggered" rather than "oh no I've been raped" like but yeah I kind of like acted kind of normal and friendly with them until I got back to the train station to get my train home and then I think I had a panic attack and cried [...] I kind of went through stages of this was bad to this was sexual assault to like this was rape and like I don't know and when I was calling it sexual assault I was like I felt bad like I didn't think like I thought "oh I didn't think they meant to do it" or like I don't know or like it was somehow my fault.

The act of naming violence can burden a survivor in activist communities. Sexual violence is a painful discovery of the hypocrisy of

activist communities. Naming can also introduce a weight of responsibility and pressure to take immediate and effective action when a survivor may not feel they have the capacity. For instance, Erin spoke about why she felt unable to speak openly about the sexual violence she experienced within her activist community:

The weight of responsibility then starts and you're like, well I don't want to tell anyone because once I tell people then I've got to do something. So then you don't tell people because you think, well if I tell my friends or the people in my kind of activist community about this then I'm going to have to do something, and I don't think I can do anything yet so I won't tell anyone because then I don't have to do anything. And it becomes this kind of cycle of silence where you just go well I won't say anything because I don't have the capacity to do anything about it and that's what I'll be expected to do and it becomes like overbearing.

Many survivors felt unable to go to the police and report what had happened to them. This distrust was borne out of bad experiences with police officers as powerful agents of the state, experiences of abuse that did not fit the crime of sexual assault or rape, a lack of physical evidence or a chronological and coherent recollection, difficulty in speaking about such a sensitive experience with a stranger and a risk that they would not be believed or understood. Instead, survivors preferred to speak about it with someone they knew and trusted. For instance, Collette experienced inappropriate sexual advances, coercion and stalking from a friend. She chose not to report this to the police and preferred to instead talk to a trusted feminist friend:

I wouldn't have wanted to go to the police. I don't want to talk to a police officer because I don't have a great impression of them [...] I suppose it [sexual violence] is hard to talk about anyway because it's hard to talk about. And also it's difficult unless you've been writing down a chronological list of events it's very hard to really get across what the problem is anyway. I think you really

need to be able to do that to report something. But I also I don't think what he'd done, it wouldn't be seen as super illegal so I wouldn't get much of a response, like they might just have a word with him or something [...] It wasn't even so much like a political thing of being "oh I'm not going to involve the police" it was more just I didn't really want to sit and talk to a police officer I'd rather be able to talk with someone that I know and that I know is going to get it because I know her, she's someone that I know, and she's involved in feminism.

For some survivors the power imbalances inherent in interactions with the police and lack of protection for activists, LGBTQ and non-binary individuals was too overwhelming. For instance, Anna explained the importance of an equal playing field in order to feel supported in addressing sexual violence:

I just don't trust cops, like, I've seen them do awful things with my own eyes, and I don't think, you know, they're not there to protect me, are they? And also I think, if you're dealing with shit that involves power imbalance, then the cops don't seem that appealing [...] if you've just come out of an abusive relationship then all you wanted was to be equals, and that's what didn't happen, that was the problem. So I feel like in the support that comes after that, I feel that it should be with people who make very apparent that you're on an equal playing field or whatever. Personally, I think that's quite important and that reassurance needs to be there, I don't think it's a good thing to be that person who's like "oh, well, I'll go beat them up for you" I don't think that's useful, and I think that's essentially the attitude of the cops.

So far, in the first half of our key findings, we have developed an understanding of what violence, abuse and harm can look like and feel like in activist communities based on the lived experiences of survivors. From these perspectives we have been able to challenge some of the dominant ideas about sexual violence. For instance, that sexual

violence is a set of discrete, visible and physical incidents that can be arranged in a hierarchy of seriousness that positions rape as the worst offence. That there is a 'right' course of action for a survivor i.e. to make sense of and name violence, tell someone, to end relationships and report it to the police. The experiences of sexual violence survivors we spoke with have demonstrated the powerful cumulative impact of 'the little things' - subtle, coercive and manipulative acts and behaviours - in creating the conducive context for sexual violations. Abusers chose to target vulnerabilities, exploit personal and intimate knowledge and weaponise activism, feminism and gender self-determination to secure power, control and sexually violate survivors. Intersections of gender, class and ability shaped survivors' experiences and meanings of harm. Within these contexts and complexities survivors needed time to name and make sense of what they had experienced. In the second half we will explore the role of self-protective denials and the silencing of survivors in activist groups and communities.

## **P a r t T w o**

### **How is harm denied and silenced in activist groups and communities?**

In this second section we focus on exploring the layers of self-protective denials and silencing at work in activist communities. This involves a critical examination of many unspoken aspects of activist cultures including how norms, values and hierarchies protect the powerful and disadvantage sexual violence survivors across intersections of gender, class, ability and sexuality. Whilst self-protective cultural processes serve important functions in establishing trust, belonging and political activation in activist arenas, these processes also harbour potential for exclusion, inequality and harm. In particular, a simultaneous 'knowing and not-knowing' (Cohen 2002, p. 24) was present in activist arenas. Knowledge of sexual violence was both acknowledged and denied through a range of increasingly

elaborate denials. This allowed the projection of a collective ethos of equality and social justice that also maintained a 'conducive context' of sexual violence in which the credibility of survivors and anti-violence activists was under threat. This meant that survivor-led processes and responses that attempted to address harm were set up to fail. The long-term negative impacts of experiencing violence, abuse and harm on survivors and loss of survivors from activist groups, campaigns and communities radically undermines the radical and transformative character of a social movement.

## **Unexamined norms and values**

Survivors spoke positively about their initial encounters with activist spaces and communities. Such communities provided an important arena for social connection, political activation and empowerment. For many survivors, personal experiences of rejection, isolation and discrimination in a range of social institutions, including the family, education and the workplace, fueled a desire to search for alternative places of belonging that were orientated towards egalitarian principles, diversity and social justice. It is important to remember that activist communities and spaces can be precious and hard won in a neoliberal society that is hostile to radical political autonomy. For Anna, a squat enabled her to meet other transgender people and find queer politics:

[The squat] was where I really discovered, 'queer-as-in-fuck-you' politics. It was the first place that I'd met other trans people, and all of it was a really big deal for me. [...] I think it was, the otherness, feeling really other all the time, so you're looking for other people who feel other, and seeing if their reasoning for being other has some correlation with your own. [...] That's probably what initially led me there. And I think, what kept me there was probably feeling a part of something. Having a bit of a gang around me was pretty empowering.

Other survivors also experienced activist communities as powerful places of belonging. Survivors likened these communities to a family or

a home with a strong sense of trust and loyalty. For instance, Lydia recalled the way she felt: 'we're a community, we're a family, and I bought into that. I bought into that 100%, we're a family'. Hayley spoke about how strong she felt doing direct action in solidarity with others: 'there's something very unifying when you're fighting with people against a common enemy'. Activist communities can offer tremendous potential for personal transformation and belonging, as Leah reflected on her time in the protest camp: 'I got a lot from it, confidence and self-esteem, and I felt for the first time in my life that I'd found somewhere where I fitted in. That with this bunch of fucking nutters it was home. That was not something I've ever had because I'm always an outsider'. Some activist communities projected a strong message of inclusion, as radical spaces in which individuals were free to defy the restrictions of wider society. For instance, Beth described how this operated in a queer activist group:

There's also another kind of rhetoric around the group which is like "it's such a welcoming space where everyone feels at home" it's like a homecoming coming to this group [...] This idea of this being a liberationist space where you can experience things that you may not be able to experience in normal life and about how important this is and about how people really find themselves in these [activist spaces].

Many survivors invested a lot of time and energy into the activist community. Speaking out about experiences of violence risk losing an important place of belonging and valuable social attachments developed in activist communities. Enduring trust, in particular, could be established very quickly by taking part in risky and dangerous protest actions. As Erin described:

I think you put yourself in a position of like really deep trust with people, which obviously you can do in any situation but I think if you've, done something illegal together or very dangerous together, which you might have done, then that builds a bond between you that's

quite like quite profound that then even if you may not know that person that well maybe you haven't talked to them about some of these beliefs or ideas, you trust them because you've done, whatever dangerous or illegal thing you've done together like that's quite a bonding experience it's hard to break that even if you don't see someone for years, you're like I still trust you because we did this thing together.

Outside of direct action common beliefs and values also played a part in a culture of trust in activist communities. This culture can enable activists to make and sustain connections, share living space and resources with each other across the country and further afield. However, as Erin went on to describe, an assumption that everyone inside an activist community is trustworthy can also make it harder to identify and challenge problematic behaviours:

I don't want to destroy that. I actually think that's a really great thing and in the housing co-op I was in we had a rule that friends were always welcome but, friends were described incredibly broadly. It wasn't like literally people you actually knew it was people sort of in certain situations and so because of that, I think you learn to trust people. Maybe differently maybe more quickly. And it's not just that you then trust that other person and put yourself maybe in a vulnerable position with them when you don't know that much about them but also that that has a kind of ripple effect is that other people your fellow activists trust that person and they see you trusting them and think everything's great and so it's harder to say "oh this looks a bit weird like what's going on there" because there's this culture almost like a culture of trust.

This culture of trust was taken advantage of by undercover police officers in the infiltration of environmental and social justice campaign groups that began in the mid 1980s and ended with the exposure of Mark Kennedy in 2010 (Jones 2013). A critical examination of the norms and values that are taken for granted in activist cultures can



help to protect and maximize the transformative potential of social justice movements (see also Morris 2010). Related to this is an understanding of how power can be simultaneously enacted, silenced and denied in activist communities. Survivors spoke about how power operated to determine who is credible, what and who is valued and how decisions are made and by who in activist communities.

## **Unexamined power hierarchies**

On the flipside of trust was a culture of distrust. This can be understood as a self-protective mechanism in the context of a society hostile to radical activism. However, it can operate as a strict binary: people are either 'in' or 'out'. Erin described how this worked:

Weirdly there's also a culture of distrust. So if you're in, you're trusted, but if you're out, you're very out. So if someone thinks you're a Nazi then you. I mean, god forbid because you'll just never come back to the [social centre]. You see what I mean it's very black and white sometimes. You're either in and you're so trusted or you're out and you'll never be trusted again. And being in and trusted can put people I think in a position of power to then do what they like and I don't think that's good.

Decisions about who is credible enough to be trusted and take up roles are made in activist communities despite claims to be inclusive, non-hierarchical and free from leaders or rules. Many survivors talked about implicit hierarchies which individuals used to exert power in activism. This often replicated power hierarchies of wider society that privileged older, white, middle class, able-bodied and cisgender men. For instance, Anna reflected on who the decision-makers tended to be in activist circles:

I think it's interesting to note that it's usually the people you would expect to dominate those things demographics-wise. It's probably not going to be the trans women because there's like 5 of us, it's probably

not going to be the black women because there's like 2 of them, it's going to be, probably cis queers and dudes that call the shots, replicating dominant cultural hierarchies. That's kind of the deal I think with radical circles, 9 times out of 10, it's just a microcosm of what already exists, just with different haircuts.

In her experience Leah also found a patriarchal structure lurking underneath claims to be non-hierarchical:

One that bills itself as non-hierarchical but clearly is. And the hierarchy does seem to be quite male even though there seems to be more women involved in the movement the men seem to have the positions of power, go figure. It's not anything new or radical or different. It just seems to be aping the old patriarchal norms despite having some very radical people within it. It doesn't seem to be able to escape that structure.

As Erin spent more time in the social centre, she began to question the commitment to inclusion and dominance of older white men in determining what and who was valued in activism:

I think that, as I spent more and more time there [the social centre] and became more and more involved and was there every week running stuff and doing things with people that it became obvious that, while people can talk about sexism and talk about racism and talk about trying to make the space welcoming for everybody actually we don't always walk the walk we can talk about it. [...] The white guys just want to sit and read. And it really pisses me off because I don't want to read anything by a white guy in a beard like I have a rule I do not read them. So if someone says 'oh have you read Marx's Capital' I'm like "phhfff no" I'm like "have you read Assata Shakur's biography? No, well then we can't have a conversation." So it's like I'd get really frustrated that's the continual focus and it creates this hierarchy that, the dudes with the

beards who wrote the books somehow knew more than everyone else and doesn't recognise that actually a lot of other people were thinking about that and doing stuff at the time when the guy's with beards were alive but they didn't have the opportunity to write them down or they were too busy trying to change the fucking world to write it down. So that's always kind of a continual source of tension.

In particular, divisions were drawn between those who did the most work and labour, especially in establishing a group or space, and those who attended infrequently and got involved later. Value was attached to being a founding member, having a paid work position (if available) and consistent commitment in time and effort as a volunteer. For instance, Anna noted how paid positions within a co-op served as an avenue of power: 'There's a social hierarchy of people at work in the co-op over the people who attend the co-op and events at it. That's just one of many but that's a really obvious one though. Yeah also, one where I feel that people are trying to get into that to get that power as well'. Hayley spoke about 'founder's syndrome' to explain how local working class people were excluded from a radical housing co-op. In addition, Leah highlighted how difficult it was to challenge an abusive founder with a strong claim to power: 'He's the one who has organised it all so we kind of have to fucking have him there even if we want him there or not because it's his camp. And he holds all the power. And the purse strings.'

Particular activists are able therefore to take up positions of authority and enact power under the guise of non-hierarchical collective structures. This can reproduce a cult of 'celebrity' or activist 'stars' who have the power to control what can be said and who is in and who is out. This problem can be very hard to talk about in activist circles, as Beth explains:

Some things are allowed to be said and some people in the group decide what's allowed to be said and the people who don't toe that line are immediately suspect not just

kind of “no I don’t agree with you” but like “you can’t exist in this group we have to get rid of you and not only you but anybody who knows you too” [...] I guess is about this kind of celebrity this subcultural celebrity thing where some people become untouchable or in [group] where some people say what goes and then there’s a load of acolytes there’s something there about this sort of hierarchical or you know reliance on celebrity that, that I think is a big big problem in activist communities that you get someone who appears to be really right on might be a bully.

Survivors who ‘failed’ to embody what is valued in activism (a hierarchy of value that protects the privilege of older, white, middle class, able-bodied, cisgender men) were at risk of harm and not being believed if they spoke up about it. This leads us to consider how intersections of ability, gender, class and sexuality shape who is seen as credible and the impact this has on survivors.

## **Intersections of Harm**

Half of the survivors we spoke to live with a disability. The cultural norms in many activist spaces, groups and communities (e.g. that reward work, time and effort) could exclude people with disabilities. This could lead to feelings of shame and guilt, for instance Micah stated: ‘I think it’s quite difficult like being [disabled] and being involved in stuff and a lot of stuff is not very accessible and I also feel bad if I have to take breaks and I feel like people will be looking down on me for not doing all the things’. With their credibility already feeling insecure, a survivor with disabilities can face having their disability used against them by an abuser, as Breanna explained: ‘He’s been saying that I’m not reliable. He gaslit me. When I was kicking off about him being sexually predatory it was because I was a bit mad and “sexuality is the first thing to go love” [...] he doesn’t understand why I might have had a problem and it’s “because I’m a bit mad that I can’t remember it”’. Finding out who has been harmed can be important for

activists who want to use the identity of a survivor to determine the 'truth', as Grace experienced:

I just felt like people wanted to keep it at arm's length and not get involved and because she was [disabled] I'd had good friends that are female and really right on ask me things like "oh maybe she imagined it she's [disabled]" [...] People were like "I want to know who is it?" because you know who it is effects whether or not it's true or not because that's what they were getting at, they were getting at if they're responsible respected person then they're telling the truth if they are a druggie with mental health problems they might be making it up.

Survivors felt unable to speak about the complexities of living with violence and trauma, this was unspeakable and too disruptive to the projected ethos of an activist space. For instance, Beth, a working class queer woman, spoke about how she felt about being excluded:

To me it's about me not being allowed to be who I am or to bring the complexities that I bring or to bring the discomforts that I bring to a particular group and I think it's about. Yeah me being an intolerable 'poisonous' person and it's just so so painful.

The overwhelming whiteness of activist spaces was also experienced as unspeakable and not considered a priority in some activist groups. Erin, expressed her frustration at the silencing of race: 'We're not talking about race we need to talk about race because nearly everybody is white [...] Like what the fuck is up with that? We can't not talk about it. It's not people of colour's responsibility to resolve this or to bring it up. We have to bring it up.'

Women survivors had to contend with the 'myth of the vengeful victim' (Herman 2005 pg. 575) and virgin/whore binary logic that cast doubt on a woman's claims of rape and sexual assault. Erin explains how gender plays out in activism to silence survivors:

You're either an angel or a witch so either wonderful or you're out for revenge you want to destroy all men, you're some kind of uber-feminist who wants to kill all men. It's this idea that you can't ever say anything and just mean it. You're either doing it because you hate everybody or you're doing it because you just can't help being wonderful. And that's really frustrating because you think well in activist circles shouldn't we be trying to break that down? But it's still scary because you think people are just going to think that I'm just trying to get revenge.

Micah and Anna talked about how they struggled to name and gain recognition of their experiences within dominant narratives of sexual violence that frame men as perpetrators within heterosexual encounters. Anna, a transgender woman who was abused by a woman, reflected on those who doubted and minimised her experience: 'It's really difficult to not take it personally. And to not think, well, like, if I was being abused by a man would you take it seriously? Or if I was cis would you take it seriously? Or if I was straight would you take it seriously?' This ties in with a silencing of sexual violence, cissexism and the exclusion of transgender and non-binary individuals by women, particularly within some feminist activist groups who can conflate safety with organising as a 'women-only space'. For instance, Micah reflected on their experience with a feminist group as a non-binary individual:

I was involved in [feminist group] for a little bit but like had some issues with transphobic shit so that didn't last very long.[...] I think it was just whenever I brought up or pointed out how something they did or wrote was like transphobic I'd just get a big essay back from like these cis feminists about how it wasn't transphobic and I shouldn't be offended which wasn't very helpful.[...] There was like a lot of focusing on connecting vaginas as meaning womanhood and excluding non-binary people. And when I brought up the excluding non-binary people like one of them sent me an article about men taking over

feminism and that wasn't very nice because I'm not a man.

Just over half of the survivors we spoke to were bisexual or queer. Many survivors spoke about how activist spaces could feel sexually charged at times, with events and parties that indirectly encouraged sexual freedom between activists. However, some of these spaces lacked any clear ground-rules about sexual boundaries and consent. This introduced a series of complexities that compounded harm, particularly for survivors who identified as queer, bisexual, asexual or were questioning their sexuality. For instance, Beth, who was sexually harassed at a queer event, reflected on this harm in relation to a long-term loss of control in self-defining her sexuality:

In fact, the feeling I got was that I should be fucking grateful that this person was into me that I should be flattered by that. Yeah. And the [queer] part of it I can't really emphasise that enough because when you're [queer] often times you'll grow up with a sense that your sexuality isn't your own that you are either a non-sexual person, a hypersexual person, disgusting, so this is all playing out in my encounters with this person as well.

Hayley, who described herself as bisexual, also spoke about the pressure on her to feel empowered as a sexually desiring woman and disregard her own feelings of confusion about her sexuality: 'I didn't have a clue really about bodily autonomy and all these things I was still trying to get into this idea of like "oh yeah if you're a liberated woman you should want to have sex with people" but not really quite being that person and just being generally quite confused about sexuality'. This highlights the harms that can occur if the sexual dynamics of activist spaces remain unspoken; without open discussion about consent and sexual boundaries.

## **Do Nothing: The silencing and denial of sexual violence**

Some of the survivors we spoke to had never spoken out publicly about the sexual violence they experienced within activism. Others had spoken out publicly and had involvement with challenging their abuser using safer spaces procedures, disciplinary or community accountability processes. The fear of not being believed by those around them was a critical concern for all of the survivors we spoke to and often lay behind the decision not to speak about it publicly. Not being believed became the norm that a survivor faced in activist circles, as Micah explained: 'I just feel like I've always got to start from a position of like people aren't going to believe me'.

Survivors were effectively silenced by a culture of denial in which survivors were not believed or trusted by those around them. This indicates a deep-rooted layer of denial and silence at work in activist communities. This harmful dynamic of activist cultures that survivors experienced connected with what Cohen defines as a dilemma of simultaneously 'knowing and not-knowing' in which 'the existence of what is denied must be somehow known, and statements expressing this denial must be somehow believed in' (Cohen 2002, p. 24). This means that activists are aware of sexual violence whilst also investing in ways to silence survivors and deny that it can happen. The effort put into satisfying a need to not know, that is 'a need to be innocent of a troubling recognition' (Cohen 2002, p. 25), that sexual violence and abuses of power operate in activist groups, campaigns and communities that position themselves as inclusive non-hierarchical spaces of equality and liberation. This ultimately leads to a need to, as Erin said, 'do nothing', to refuse to know and a 'pernicious ignorance' (Dotson 2011, p. 239) that further harms survivors.

Survivors recalled being further harmed by the responses from others in their activist community. Negative responses ranged from silence and pretending not to have heard the survivor, defending the abuser, withdrawing support and friendship, requiring further information and evidence, and explaining abuse away e.g. as an interpersonal problem. For instance, Beth spoke about the responses she got from others



when she disclosed the violence she was experiencing: ‘silence really. If, well, the ‘kindest’ responses have been silence or pretending that I haven’t said anything or you know being a bit sad but not being able to understand me or, on a spectrum to ‘we can’t be your friend’. Many survivors were told to stop speaking about what had happened to them because of an established friendship with the abuser. For instance, Breanna recalled how ‘I tried to talk to [friend] and he was like “these are my friends that you are talking about I can’t talk about this”’. Breanna also struggled with those around her offering her inappropriate support to address activist burnout: ‘this assumption that I was all sorts of things. I got referred to one of [partner of abuser] friends for counseling who does burnt out activists and I was like “I’m not a fucking activist I’m not burnt out I’ve got PTSD because of stuff’.

Other survivors also experienced members of the activist community minimise violence, make excuses for the abuser and reframe sexual violence as something else. Take, for instance, Leah’s recollection of an interaction with an activist friend:

“Oh well you know what he’s like he can’t help it” I said “well of course he can bloody help it” and then you know the classic “oh well he’s just a man” and I was like “what so that excuses his vile behaviour?” “oh well I’m not saying that” but, I said “that’s exactly what you’re saying” she said “well why can’t you just ignore it” I said ‘well why should I have to ignore it?’ I said ‘why should he be allowed to get away with it?’ [...] People don’t want to get involved in other people what they perceive to be other people’s dramas. If they perceive it to be ‘oh it’s a personality thing’ or ‘it’s just [abuser] being a wanker as per’ they don’t want to get involved and they don’t maybe see just how serious an issue that it is because people will walk away from it, rather than come back.

Autonomous activist spaces, like social centres and venues, faced a dilemma of knowing when they were responsible for taking action. Many of these spaces tended to take on responsibility only when

sexual violations happened in ‘their’ place. However, harm occurred across multiple spaces and places often with the knowledge of others in the community. Anna reflected on how a social centre struggled to take responsibility for the sexual violence she had experienced. This indicated a clear reluctance to address sexual violence until absolutely necessary:

It was just, for their sake, I suppose, trying to cover themselves, but there seems to be a sort of conflict of interest there. If your main priority is making sure that you can account for everything, and you don’t act until you absolutely need to. That’s not my top priority [...] more than like “how do we not get into trouble?” or whatever. Because I still think that’s a big problem, and, yeah, abuse in radical communities is obviously a problem, and I think within that specific community it’s still happening, like all the time, and not everyone does talk about it.

Survivors spoke about negative responses, such as derailing and apologism, particularly from men but also from people of all genders. For instance, a call for evidence and an investigation was common, a need that Hayley connected to a fear amongst men of being accused of sexual violence:

People were saying “no no no you need to have checks and balances you need to have an investigation you need to get evidence Person A Person B and you need to find out the facts of what happened” and all of this and you know I think maybe some of this was well meaning “oh the poor guy what if he didn’t do it” but like based on not really knowing the reality and then also maybe being a man thinking “oh what if someone makes that allegation about me?””

This insecurity, about malicious disclosures and the potential to bully others, served to derail dealing with the problem of sexual violence, was also picked up by Micah:

I remember at some point in my local [activist organisation] there was I think it was actually to do with creating a complaints procedure but I know like immediately like a guy put his hand up like how the complaints procedure could be abused by like “oh I could just make something up about this guy because I don’t like him”.

A fear of ‘false allegations’ and search for ulterior motives of the survivor was also noticed by Anna when she was challenged by an activist whilst going through a safer spaces procedure:

The thing that really made me lose my cool a little bit was someone saying “well, what if we don’t believe you, like what if you’re making it up, and what if someone just doesn’t like someone and they’ve got a grudge and they want to use this as a way to bully them or whatever”. And yeah, I was kind of left speechless by that, because one part of me wanted to be like “well, if you want me to tell you, this is exactly what happened, but I shouldn’t have to do that” and the idea that we would doubt first really, really, angered me.

However, it was not clear what ‘evidence’ or investigation would be enough to allay this fear. This led to frustrations as survivors frequently faced doubt ‘I just felt dead affronted that he would not listen to his fellow female activists, wouldn’t always be female, but if they alleged that someone had assaulted them, how insulting. I felt really insulted’. Even when survivors had substantial evidence, others could refuse to consider it, as Lydia experienced:

I sent him a message saying “look I can show you arrest reports. I can show you pictures of the injuries” because I’d followed all the you know the abuse website help suggestions. I had a suitcase packed under my bed. I had photographs. I kept diaries and I said “I can show you it all” and he said “no I’m not interested” he said “you will

manipulate it to make him look bad” right and that was the only time I ever reached out and said “please I want to show you” I said “come round I want to show you what he’s done”.

Negative responses, struggles and challenges add further layers of harm on top of the harm already experienced. Anna explained how negative and inconsiderate responses from those around her in the activist community further isolated her:

It’s difficult to trust people in general as a consequence of all of this, because it’s not just the [abuse], it’s how the community deals with it, and it’s how people respond to you when you’re in crisis and how awful it can be. How inconsiderate people can be and you just start to think, “well, I’m not even going to bother to trust you anymore, I’m not going to expect any level of understanding as a default setting”. The way that I sort of view people a lot of the time is, like, guilty until proven innocent. These days I’m not trusting and I’m not interested in making new friends. I can’t trust these people.

### **Set up to fail: Attempts to address sexual violence**

The work of supporting survivors and challenging negative responses in the activist community frequently fell to a small group of survivors and allies. As already discussed survivors can face multiple challenges to their credibility based on intersections of ability, class, gender and sexuality. This means that it can be difficult for sexual violence survivors to claim sufficient power to decide whose position in the culture of trust should be questioned. The lack of interrogation of structural power relations within activism therefore leaves safer spaces and community accountability processes set up to fail. Some survivors spoke about the exhausting labour needed to contend with challenges to their judgement and poor understandings of sexual violence in their activist community. For instance, Collette explained:

There's just a lack of trust of survivors that we have to be really transparent and say 'this is why I've done this' there isn't like a just a sense of, 'oh ok' because it's not that people don't, like I don't think this this other guy who's been saying 'oh can we not try and work out how to get him back down' he doesn't really have a problem with me personally, so it's it's like why can't you just trust me? It's like a really frustrating thing you're feeling that I'm having to like constantly justify and explain and educate people about what's going on [...] I think also they're probably a little bit the same thinking taking the path of least resistance in a sense because they're probably quite sick of it and it's just easier to let him go on.

Micah also talked about the complexities of giving and taking support from other survivors and the absence of men in taking on this labour:

Always find like I'm supporting other survivors and they're supporting me for the most part we're non-binary people and women. And men don't do any of the work in making people aware of abusers, supporting people when they're having panic attacks and stuff. [...] I think having friends around particularly friends who are also survivors has been good but also I feel like I don't like putting all the pressure on them because I know. It is very stressful. I like being there to support other people but also it is really hard.

We heard about several different processes that individuals and groups used to try to address the sexual violence that survivors had experienced. These ranged from procedural and bureaucratic to informal conversations and community accountability processes, which varied in relation to how survivor-centric they were. For instance, Anna found herself in the peripheral of a radical social centres response to her disclosure. The social centre collective invited her to by a meeting in which they went through the safer spaces procedure, however her expectations and needs were sidelined:

I kind of went into it expecting something very different, I'll say that much. I was expecting it to be like "right, so, this has happened, and this why I feel like this" and I was kind of presented with quite a lot of bureaucracy. Which is quite a strange response, I suppose, when you're feeling so emotional about a thing.

Micah held their abuser to account using a disciplinary procedure that was hastily set up by their activist organisation to deal with Micah's disclosure of sexual violence. This process involved the collection of evidence, taking statements, a hearing with a 'neutral' sub-group of the organisation, a predetermined tick box of outcomes and final decision of permanent exclusion of the abuser from the organisation. In a summary of the process Micah described how this process mirrored a criminal justice approach and sidelined their needs for confidentiality, support and desired outcomes:

The first thing was my email got given out without telling me. And then the fact that I wasn't asked what I wanted to get out of it. The fact that the whole thing just mirrored a court process and was really weird. How long it took, it too two months. I think yeah. I'd found it quite hard to make a complaint because it is hard to balance confidentiality with getting something done about it. Also there was no like waiting area for me at the meeting so we had to go down the road to a coffee shop whilst they made their decision. Lack of support during the process.

Some survivors took part in a community accountability or safer spaces process to address the harms they had experienced. There were both positive and negative experiences. For instance, Breanna took part in a community accountability process to hold her abuser to account. A working group approached her and offered her a supportive space to make sense of what she had been through, whilst also making approaches to her abuser to hold him to account. Breanna described how this process of listening and believing her was incredibly important for her recovery and reclamation of her credibility:

They've been amazing. They've restored my hope in people. They've made me believe which a lot of people didn't. They sat in [friend's] flat, my friend's because I didn't want to do it here, and they had me tell all the harm stories about what had happened with details as much as I was comfortable and it was really traumatic and then afterwards it was like being a phoenix. They've un-sprung me. I was in therapy for 6 months going "I'm stuck I'm bitter I'm suicidal something needs to change and I don't know what it is and if it doesn't I'm going to end up dead" and they were the change they un-sprung me. Literally. I was like that and then I just went it's like being carried and I don't think they'll ever know ever ever know exactly how much they've done [...] They've given me confidence they've given me strength and knowing that I can go "look this man did this shit and there's an accountability process they can answer any questions" makes me feel less like a lone screaming delusional nutter. No [abuser] has been questioning their credibility and my credibility and they've given me my credibility that I need.

However, for other survivors the burden of responsibility on them as well as those involved in a process could be overwhelming. Being the survivor at the centre of the process introduces pressures to have the capacity to make the 'right' decisions at the 'right' times, as Erin described:

I've kind of revisited that situation that the onus is on the victim to decide what happens. In some ways that's important in other ways, [I] don't have the capacity to do that and you actually want everyone else to say "we know what need to happen because we have an opinion about these people". it's almost like they're saying "we don't have an opinion about people who do this so you need to decide" and actually I think we should have an opinion and we should have already decided what that opinion is and then just refer back to the fucking policy and make it

happen otherwise we'll get all these situations where women are being asked "well what do you want to happen?"

When survivors shared experiences of abuse with their community, or asked for space from those that had caused them harm, many found that people in their wider networks were keen for information about what had happened. This challenges a survivor's need for confidentiality. People's interest in finding out what has happened, why people have fallen out, stopped talking to one another, or been asked to leave a space or suspended from a group led them to ask for information. A survivor's need for the situation to remain confidential can create an explanatory space for abusers to appropriate and use to produce their own version of events within the community. The growing acceptance of an abuser's reframed reality could wear down the survivor and disrupt the process, as Collette described:

I know he goes to a community [space] where I know some of the people who also go there and they say that basically he just talks about it like constantly. And so he's obviously still pretty obsessed with the whole thing but also I think he's trying to spin it as like that he's kind of done something that's was maybe a bit wrong but oh now he's been banned and poor him and isn't that a bit of an over-reaction. He's not really sort of saying well actually he's been told not to come until he engages with the process. [...] Part of the problem has been when we asked him not to come down we kind of did it privately because I didn't want to just put it all out on the internet and that's kind of given [abuser], because this other guy said he didn't find out that he was banned until he invited him down one day and was told 'oh I'm banned I've been banned' and so this guy was like 'oh why's that?' and it's given [abuser] a bit of an opportunity to spin stuff.

This can introduce additional pressures on processes to be more transparent and less confidential: to be completely open and identify all those involved. When asked how the process could have been



improved Collette said she wanted the process to be ‘more transparent about him being banned and why and also it wasn’t the “oh he’s banned” but like he’s not allowed down until he engages with this process and then people would maybe be more aware of, first of all why, because he got to trivialize it’. However, some survivors were not ready or willing to go public and have their identities divulged as part of a transparent process as Erin described:

Publicly naming and shaming them also shames you, that means that you have to out yourself. And that’s what happened with [ex-partner]. He had to stand down from a position of power in a group we were in and, I was like “you can’t talk about that, you can’t talk about that”. I wrote a statement with him and two other people from the group and he was like “well I thought about it and I want to say this” and I was like “no because you’re dragging me into it, like everyone already knows that you’re my partner, so they’re already going to know I don’t want it to be made any more explicit for anyone who doesn’t know just let them be in the dark about it and these two other women don’t deserve to be dragged into this you’ve already punished them with your behaviour you have to take this alone.”

In practice, the amount of time and energy put into safer spaces and community accountability processes can produce little won gains. Again, Collette reflected on her involvement in a process in which her abuser refused to engage:

I think once you go down the transformative justice route it does put quite a weight on the survivor which again is like it shouldn’t and that’s not what it meant to do. It just seems to be what it does in practice. [...] And it is really frustrating because it’s like I don’t know what I could do or what the facilitator can do like you can try talking to people and explaining things but, it’s both very time consuming and I think of limited effect.

The accountability process ended for Breanna as her abuser refused to acknowledge his abusive behaviour. It was very difficult for activists to accept and take responsibility for the harm that they had caused. Abuser disengagement from safer spaces and community accountability processes was common, as Collette stated: ‘normally if someone calls a process they will ask for the person to not come down until they’ve engaged with the process and what you often find is that the person won’t engage with the process’. Sexual violence violates the culture of trust that protects activism from wider society and interrupts the projection of a collective ethos of equality, liberation and inclusion. Due to the in/out binary logic of activist spaces abusers are extremely resistant to taking responsibility for sexual violations for fear of losing their place and social connections within the community. For instance, Erin reflected on the common fears of abusers faced with a process:

Because they can’t undo it and they’ve done something so horrific that. But how to get someone to accept that when they probably don’t even, might not even realize they’ve done anything wrong yet? I mean “I’m just great aren’t I?” How do you get them to the point where they can accept “what I did was so awful that actually some people will never want to speak to me again and some spaces will never let me in again.” I just think, when do you bring that up in the process? Like, that could totally derail the whole thing and it just blow up in your face and they’d just be like “I’m not doing this” because also they’ve got to buy into it haven’t they, you can’t do it without them. If they walk out the door that’s it the accountability process is done isn’t it?

To avoid acknowledgement of their behaviour some abusers reframed what had happened in order to avoid the stigma of being a rapist. For instance, Micah’s abuser attempted to reframe a sexual violation as a communication breakdown: ‘They called it a breakdown in communication or something like that and like they used the fact that they like asked me before hugging me as like a reason that they weren’t a rapist’. Similarly, Collette reflected on how her abuser put a

lot of time and energy into convincing himself and others that he has not harmed her: 'he also needs to tell himself that he's not doing anything wrong and he needs to try and convince other people that he's not doing anything wrong so he tends to do it more through a sort of manipulating and just trying to wear people down type and ignoring boundaries and it's much more emotional'. Other abusers blamed the survivor for their abusive behaviour. For example, Leah attempted to challenge her abuser: 'how aggressive and rude in your face and nasty he was and he had just literally looked at me sneered laughed and said "well you know the answer to that one: don't annoy me" and walked off.

Related to this trend of abusers not engaging is a denial in the evasion of opportunities for self-education on issues of consent, sexual boundaries, safer spaces and community accountability processes. In order to open up discussion of sexual violence in activist communities some survivors organised workshops and events for their community. However, they found that attendance was low, indicating a clear avoidance of the knowledge and understanding that would lead to a disturbing conclusion. For instance, Grace spoke about how her group 'invited [name] to come from [city] to facilitate a discussion on [sexual violence] and the idea was for it to be abstract and for the people in the [social centre] to come and learn about different ways of dealing with it so that they could deal with it and we'd help them and none of them came'. Similarly, reflecting on the scrutiny that her group attracts, Collette explained 'we've done we've held workshops down here but people don't, the people who complain the most are the least likely to turn up to the workshops. [...] You know I think it's part ignorance but people remain ignorant because they don't really want to know'.

## **Backlash and Resistance**

Discussion over safer spaces policies and community accountability processes has become particularly volatile over the past few years. The identification of several high-profile men in the Left (e.g. Julian Assange, Martin Smith and Steve Hedley) as abusers has produced a range of aggressive denials and stark criticisms of safer spaces and accountability processes. This has included the development of groups

such as The Solidarity Collective<sup>7</sup> to defend the ‘rights’ of men identified as abusers within activist communities. This resistance can be described as a backlash against survivors and anti-violence activists. Safer spaces policies have been described as paternalistic ‘child-gates’. Safer spaces policies have been accused of being exclusionary: ‘safer spaces legitimise the exclusion of working class activists who exhibit any hint of sexism, homophobia, racism or Islamophobia’ (Mather 2014). Argued to sanitise and weaken social movements, Left Unity feared that the logical outcome of safer spaces would mean that activists would be ‘unable to engage with the general cut and thrust of political argument’ (2014).

These more elaborate denials position survivors and anti-violence activists as carrying out ‘witch hunts’ motivated by a feminist conspiracy to divide and destroy the Left. As the Solidarity Collective argue: ‘there is a pattern to these attacks, most of which are being carried out, ironically, in the name of ‘safer spaces’. The effect has been to undermine activist networks and to slowly grind down the morale of those who are motivated to take on the state and capitalism at both local and national levels’ (2014). This gets us to some of the most elaborate denials of sexual violence in activist communities. This development can be understood as a self-protective denial of the most powerful in order to silence survivors, take no action and sustain the projection of collective ethos of equality, liberation and inclusion. As Judith Herman explains, this ability to name and define reality, that is to uncover conspiracies against the Left, and have this reality accepted by others as the ‘truth’ is the preserve of the most powerful and privileged:

In order to escape accountability for [their] crimes, the perpetrator does everything in [their] power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of [their] victim. If [they] cannot silence [them]

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<sup>7</sup> More information about The Solidarity Collective can be found at <https://saferspaces.exposed>

absolutely, [they] tries to make sure that nobody listens. To this end [they] marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is [their] prerogative to name and define reality, and the more [their] arguments prevail. (Herman 1992, p. 7-8)

This resistance and backlash was experienced by survivors at the grassroots level of activism. Whilst there is an agreement that sexual violence is abhorrent, there was a gendered struggle over who should have the power to intervene. For instance, Hayley described how this played out in her activist community:

I actually think that a lot of men who kind of were involved in this backlash like “yes we’re against the abuse of women”. They are against rape and domestic abuse and they think it’s awful and child abuse is awful but it should be them who decide and them who protect and them who make the decisions. They’re fine with it until the women get the power and the women get the say and actually yes survivors can say “you did this to me.”

In social centres and venues there was often reluctance to formalise a safer space policy and survivors and anti-violence activists would have to argue for its completion. Erin described how women had to struggle to get a safer spaces policy written down and made visible in their social centre:

Eventually they did create a safer spaces policy [...] there was a big discussion about how “oh we don’t need that because we already do it”. A lot of women were just like “well if you’re already doing it then what’s the problem in writing it down?” Because sometimes you get people

coming in the [social centre] who, are behaving in an inappropriate way and you need to, it gets to the point where you need to remove them. And some of those people don't like it unless you've got it written down. And I think a lot of people said "well we don't need it written down it's our [social centre] we'll decide" and we were like "yeah but also if you're the only person working on the bar having a bit of paper with it on can actually help you" so after much discussion there is one now.

In speaking out and demanding action as or on behalf of sexual violence survivors, many came up against a distinct anti-feminist sentiment within some activist spaces and communities. This constructed survivors and anti-violence activists as 'feminist killjoys' (Ahmed 2010) that threaten to interrupt what is positive and unifying in activist communities. For instance, Lydia explained: 'I think there's really negative impressions still out there of people who identify as being feminist that you're a killjoy that if you don't go along with certain things then you're ruining everyone's experience'. This backlash against survivor-led responses to sexual violence is embedded in an ongoing struggle for power and control of activist arenas.

## **Impacts of Harm**

In this final section of our key findings we offer some survivors' reflections on the impact that the violence, abuse and harm they have experienced within their activist community has had upon them. Faced with layers of silencing and denial survivors were left with few options. Many survivors felt safer at a distance from the community either by leaving activist groups and organisations or changing direction in their activism. For instance, Grace spoke about how inaction on sexual violence experienced by her friend impacted on her and her activism:

I just feel like it has affected my activism because it makes you feel like how the fuck are we going to be in a hypothetical revolutionary situation when we can't even support each other when this stuff happens? And it's

made me question myself a lot and I have thought about not being involved [...] I feel like the only way out of it is to move away because I don't feel like there's anyone who wants to help kind of deal with what happened.

However, Grace was unable to move away due to financial and family circumstances relating to her financial situation. Survivors, like Collette, who stayed, had to deal with the responsibility of keeping themselves safe within everyday activist situations:

I mean sometimes I've been on demos and I've sort of seen him and I've kept my distance and he keeps his distance so it's not too bad. I think if I was in the same room as him I'd feel kind of on edge not because. I just think is he gonna, is he gonna come over and try and talk to me and then is he gonna start being quite emotional abusive?

Many survivors did not stay and experienced devastating long-term impacts to their mental health, social life, financial independence, housing and employment opportunities. Breanna explained the traumatic impact that being sexual violated within an activist community has had upon her:

Oh my god where do I start. What effect didn't it have on me is probably the bigger question isn't it? It didn't kill me. It destroyed everything else for a bit until I started rebuilding it. It destroyed my trust in people, it destroyed my friendships it destroyed my job it destroyed my home it destroyed my spirit it destroyed my mental health it destroyed my financial security it nearly made me homeless it lost my job it made me unable to love it made me unable to trust it made me get arrested under the mental health act it made me nearly take my own life and it made me think I was responsible.

Survivors can feel irrevocably changed from the violence and abuse they have been through, living with flashbacks and unpredictable

emotional responses that can intrude on everyday life long after. For instance, Lydia reflects on the long-term impact that living with violence has had upon her:

It was just that constant fear. That I think changed something in me that's never ever going to be fixed, there's this fear. Mostly I mean I'm so happy now my life is so different and I'm so happy but I live in constant fear of conflict of arguments. There was a stage when one of my good friends who really helped me out had been over and there was a knock on my door and I just burst into tears it was just like "why is someone coming to my house?" and that that has changed me forever I don't think I'll ever ever ever get over it.

The loss of, and compounding harm, to survivors due to ongoing sexual violence demonstrates how social justice movements are failing survivors. In response to the question 'What are you the proudest of in activism?' Anna stated, 'I'm most proud of surviving it [...] what really seems significant about it is that I didn't let it totally crush me'. It is clear that social justice movements are failing survivors and time has come to unpick and challenge the self-protective denials of the powerful and silencing of survivors.



## Limitations

Although we have been able to gain a lot of new insights it is important to be up front about the limitations of our research project. We always intended this to be a small-scale exploratory research project. To dip our toe and see if anyone felt able to talk about their experiences with us at a particular time. Whilst we were lucky to have ten survivors talk to us, this is a small sample that we cannot claim to be representative of all sexual violence survivors in UK activist communities. Most alarming for us is that all the survivors were white, as already discussed above. Racism in Left social movements on austerity has been discussed (Emejulu & Bassi 2015) and sexual violence in anti-racist social movements, such as Black Dissidents, is known. The need for better understandings of how sexual violence intersects with race here is paramount and clear avenue for further research projects and solidarity work.

We also deliberately chose to listen to women, transgender and non-binary survivors in this research project. Some critics will question our reluctance to speak with men as survivors and as abusers. We did this based on our own skills in working with survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence as well as the ethical and safety implications of doing research with abusers and survivors from a closed community at the same time. Further research on male survivors and those named as abusive in activist communities would be welcome, particularly to better support male survivors and better understand how abusers can make sense of the harm they have caused, choose to take responsibility of their behaviour and work to undo harm in the future.

We are also aware that many people want to know what the best course of action is and this report will fall short of these expectations. We have not done an evaluation of safer spaces or community accountability processes. There is much to be critiqued about an approach that attempts to find out 'what works' without in-depth investigation of the role of culture and power that shapes both experiences of violence and the responses developed to deal with it. This is what we have hoped to provide at this stage. Ultimately what we

have aimed to do is create more possibilities and spaces to speak openly about sexual violence in activist communities.

## **R e c o m m e n d a t i o n s**

We asked each survivor what they wanted to see come out of our research project. Not surprisingly, each survivor expressed a different vision. However, a tension emerged between (i) a need for a process, policy or a step-by-step guide to deal with sexual violence in the here and now and, (ii) a need for a broader cultural shift, better recognition of sexual violence, and more knowledge and space to talk about the complexities of sexual violence within activist communities. Erin summarised this tension:

I think some people will want a step by step guide on how to do this and I can see that's what they want. But I don't know if that's possible. And I've got a lot of zines in a box somewhere that are people talking about what happened when they went through the accountability process. I'm not saying that those things shouldn't be produced. I'm not sure how much they actually help us, because we're getting a lot of stuff where we say it didn't work. I actually think that one of the most useful things that could come out of this is not a kind of "how to do an accountability process" or "accountability processes are great", but more recognition that, there are people that you know who have experienced sexual violence so go be there for them, because we're not even doing that yet.

Beth spoke about the need for spaces to break layers of silence, validate survivor's experiences and have complex conversations about violence:

Not to be about a set of rules or a set of guidelines but about creating the possibility to talk about it that's actually all I want. There being a possibility of space to talk about

violence and sexual violence in activist communities however it emerges or manifests. I think that's what I want. You know the thing that I said earlier: it's not the abuse that kills you it's the silence. So some way of breaking the silences around abuse and oh god I mean dream come true would be, and I don't know how it would happen, but spaces where people can speak with confidence and well maybe not safety I don't know if that's ever possible, but to know that their experiences are valuable and that it's not your fault. I don't know something like that. Perhaps spaces emerging where people can share this stuff the kind of stuff that I've talked about and I'm sure you've heard many stories over the course of doing this this research.

Ultimately, as Beth touched on, survivors wanted to help others who have experienced or will experience violence within activist communities in the future. Lydia expressed this hope 'if someone could read what you've done and accept what's happening and take steps to get out of it that would be amazing'.

It is with survivors' needs in mind that we offer the following recommendations for activists:

- Survivors are already in our activist communities. Everybody involved in activist groups, campaigns and communities has a responsibility to make activism more accessible for survivors and reduce the likelihood that survivors will be further harmed across different activist spaces and networks.
- All activists need to better recognise and understand sexual violence in order to support survivors in a meaningful way. The burden of this work should not be left to a small group of survivors. Developing the best ways to support survivors will involve an in-depth interrogation of unspoken norms, values and structural power relations in activist groups, organisations and campaigns.

- Rather than rejecting survivor-led interventions outright, activists need to critically interrogate the cultural contexts, power structures and complexities in which safer spaces and accountability processes are being attempted. Refusing to open up and question cultural norms, values and power hierarchies that allow and sustain sexual violence whilst subjecting processes to intense scrutiny sets them up to fail.
- Learn how to best support survivors: create spaces, practices and opportunities to listen to and believe survivors; check in with activists who have been absent, withdrawn or quiet; create ground rules about sexual boundaries and consent in your events and spaces; educate yourself about sexual violence; develop diverse ways to enable survivors to speak out about sexual violence; help abusers to accept the harmful impacts of their behaviour and encourage them to change.

With these recommendations in mind we have developed a toolkit to enable activist groups, organisations and campaigns to begin these discussions and work together to better identify, challenge and prevent sexual violence and support survivors.

## Future Actions

The salvage collective aims to bring together women, non-binary, gender non-conforming and transgender people who have experienced gender oppression, violence and abuse in activist communities to share experiences, resources and build communities of belief, support and action. If you are interested in joining us and getting involved please visit: <https://we.riseup.net/thesalvagecollective>

Our future plans include delivering five free full-day workshops to help activist groups, collectives and organisations to better identify, challenge and prevent sexual violence. These workshops are funded by the Feminist Review Trust and will be held in Newcastle upon Tyne (in collaboration with The Star & Shadow Cinema), London (in collaboration with DIY Space for London), Liverpool (in collaboration with Next to Nowhere), Glasgow (in collaboration with Glasgow Autonomous Space) and Cardiff (in collaboration with AGrrrls and Kebele) during October and November 2016.

For further information please visit:

<https://projectsalvage.wordpress.com>

Email us: [thesalvagecollective@gmail.com](mailto:thesalvagecollective@gmail.com)

Follow us: @Project\_Salvage

## Resources & Help

For a list of and links to resources on sexual violence in activist communities including audiovisual as well as articles, blogs and fanzines please visit: <https://projectsalvage.wordpress.com/resources>

### Support for sexual violence survivors

There are a bunch of helplines that you can call and talk to a trained volunteer to explore your thoughts and feelings and to find out about services to help you to process what has happened and help you to recover. You will not have to give your real name, be told what to do or be pressured to call the police. Helplines are a supportive, non-judgmental, safe space for you to begin talking about your experiences of sexual violence from any point in your lifetime. They are confidential and can be used anonymously. You will be supported in deciding what course of action is right for you. You will be able to leave a message if you call outside the opening hours.

If you are worried about being snooped on, outed or have concerns about privacy and/or surveillance. There is further guidance on how to access resources safely by LGBTQ Youth available here (<https://ssd.eff.org/en/playlist/lgbtq-youth#playlist>) or check out Signal (<https://whispersystems.org>) an app that can encrypt your phone calls and texts (including Whats App).

#### **Rape Crisis National Freephone Helpline (women)**

**0808 802 9999**

Opening hours

12:00 – 14:30 daily

19:00 – 21:30 daily

15:00 – 17:30 Monday-Friday

<http://www.rasasc.org.uk>

#### **Trans Survivors Switchboard (trans, non-binary and questioning)**

**01273 204050**

Opening hours

13:00-17:00 Sunday

New specialist service staffed by trans volunteers to offer specialist support for trans survivors. Sex worker affirmative, LGBT affirmative and skilled in working with people in vulnerable situations, such as those who are homeless or living with domestic abuse.

<http://switchboard.org.uk/projects/helpline/>

### **National Male Survivor Helpline (men)**

**0808 800 5005**

Opening Hours

Monday 10.00-16:00

Tuesday 8.00-20.00

Thursday 8.00-20:00

Friday 10.00-16:00

Saturday 10.00-12.00 noon

<https://www.survivorsuk.org>

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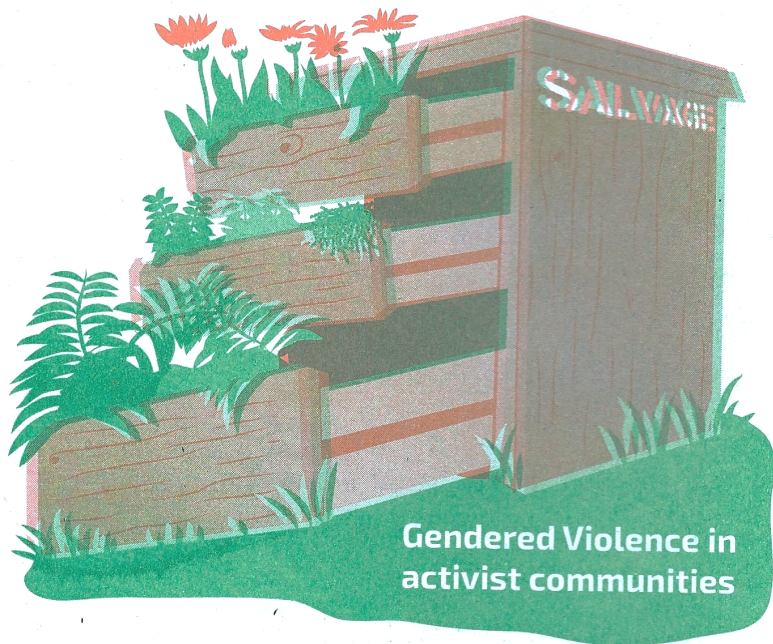
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The salvage collective was founded in November 2014 in the UK. We are a network of women, transgender and non-binary survivors, activists and allies who have experienced gender oppression, violence and abuse in social justice movements.

We aim to share experiences, resources and build communities of belief, support and action.



## Gendered Violence in activist communities

In this zine we share the findings of our first research project on gendered violence in activist communities from the perspective of survivors. Understanding how violence happens in our radical spaces offers crucial clues for us to find ways to undo these harms and strengthen the transformative potential of our social justice movements.