# taking risks: implementing grassroots community accountability strategies

*Written by a collective of women of color from Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA): Alisa Bierria, Onion Carrillo, Eboni Colbert, Xandra Ibarra, Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti, and Shale Maulana*

Sexual violence is often treated as a hyper-delicate issue that can only be addressed by trained professionals such as law enforcement or medical staff. Survivors are considered "damaged," pathologized beyond repair. Aggressors are perceived of as "animals," unable to be redeemed or transformed.[1] These extreme attitudes alienate every-day community members – friends and family of survivors and aggressors – from participating in the critical process of supporting survivors and holding aggressors accountable for abusive behavior. Ironically, survivors overwhelmingly turn to friends and family for support, safety, and options for accountability strategies.[2]

Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), a grassroots anti-rape organizing project in Seattle, has worked with diverse groups who have experienced sexual violence within their communities to better understand the nature of sexual violence and rape culture, nurture community values that are inconsistent with rape and abuse, and develop community-based strategies for safety, support, and accountability. Using some general guidelines as the bones for each community-based process, we work with survivors and their communities to identify their own unique goals, values, and actions that add flesh to their distinct safety/accountability model. In the following paper, we discuss these community accountability guidelines and provide three illustrative examples of community-based models developed by activists in Seattle.

Because social networks can vary widely on the basis of values, politics, cultures, and attitudes, we have found that having a one-size-fits-all community accountability model is not a realistic or respectful way to approach an accountability process. However, we have also learned that there are some important organizing principles that help to maximize the safety and integrity of everyone involved – including the survivor, the aggressor, and other community members. An accountability model must be creative and flexible enough to be a good fit for the uniqueness of each community's needs, while also being disciplined enough to incorporate some critical guidelines as the framework for its strategy.[3]

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

## CARA's Accountability Principles

1. Recognize the humanity of everyone involved. It is imperative that the folks who organize the accountability process are clear about recognizing the humanity of all people involved, including the survivor(s), the aggressor(s), and the community. This can be easier said than done!

It is natural, and even healthy, to feel rage at the aggressor for assaulting another person, especially a person that we care about. However, it is critical that we are grounded in a value of recognizing the complexity of each person, including ourselves. Given the needs and values of a particular community, an accountability process for the aggressor can be confrontational, even angry, but it should not be de-humanizing.

Dehumanization of aggressors contributes to a larger context of oppression for everyone. For example, alienation and dehumanization of the offending person increases a community's vulnerability to being targeted for disproportional criminal justice oppression through heightening the "monster-ness" of another community member. This is especially true for marginalized communities (such as people of color, people with disabilities, poor people, and queer people) who are already targeted by the criminal system because of their "other-ness. " When one person in our community is identified as a "monster, " that identity is often generalized to everyone in the community. This generalization can even be made by other members of the marginalized community because of internalized oppression.[4]

Also, dehumanizing the aggressor undermines the process of accountability for the whole community. If we separate ourselves from the offenders by stigmatizing them then we fail to see how we contributed to conditions that allow violence to happen.

2. Prioritize the self-determination of the survivor. Self-determination is the ability to make decisions according to one's own free will and self-guidance without outside pressure or coercion. When a person is sexually assaulted, self-determination is profoundly undermined. Therefore, the survivor's values and needs should be prioritized, recognized and respected.

The survivor should not be objectified or minimized as a symbol of an idea instead of an actual person. It is critical to take into account the survivor's vision for when, why, where and how the abuser will be held accountable. It is also important to recognize that the survivor must have the right to choose to lead and convey the plan, participate in less of a leadership role, or not be part of the organizing at all. The survivor should also have the opportunity to identify who will be involved in this process. Some survivors may find it helpful for friends or someone from outside of the community to help assess and facilitate the process with their community. To promote explicit shared responsibility, the survivor and community can also negotiate and communicate boundaries and limits around what roles they are willing to play and ensure that others perform their roles in accordance with clear expectations and goals.

3. Identify a simultaneous plan for safety and support for the survivor as well as others in the community. Safety is complex and goes far beyond keeping your doors locked, walking in well-lit areas, and carrying a weapon or a cell phone. Remember that a "safety plan" requires us to continue thinking critically about how our accountability process will impact our physical and emotional well-being.[5] Consider questions such as: how will the abuser react when he is confronted about his abusive behavior? How can we work together to de-mechanize the aggressor's strategies? Remember, one does not have control over the aggressor's violence, but you do have control over how you can prepare and respond to it.

Violence can escalate when an aggressor is confronted about her behavior. Threats of revenge, suicide, stalking, threats to disclose personal information or threats to create barriers for you to work, eat, sleep, or simply keep your life private may occur. The aggressor may also use intimidation to frighten the survivor and others. They may use privilege such as class, race, age, or socio-political status to hinder your group from organizing. While planning your offense, organizers must also prepare to implement a defense in case of aggressor retaliation. If your situation allows you to do so, organizers can also alert other members of the community about your plan and prepare them for how the abuser

may react.

Organizers must also plan for supporting the survivor and themselves. It is easy to become so distracted with the accountability process that we forget that someone was assaulted and needs our emotional support. It is likely that there is more than one survivor of sexual assault and/or domestic violence in any one community of people. Other survivors within the organizing group may be triggered during the community accountability process. Organizing for accountability should not be just about the business of developing a strategy to address the aggressor's behavior, but also about creating a loving space for community building and real care for others.

Organizers should also try to be self aware about their own triggers and create a plan for support for themselves as well. Sometimes it's helpful to have a separate group of friends that can function as a support system for the survivor as well as for the organizers.

4. Carefully consider the potential consequences of your strategy. Before acting on any plan, always make sure that your group has tried to anticipate all of the potential outcomes of your strategy. Holding someone accountable for abuse is difficult and the potential responses from the abuser are numerous. For example, if you choose to use the media to publicize the aggressor's behavior, you might think of the consequences of the safety and privacy of the survivor and the organizers involved. But you will also have to consider the chances of the media spinning the story in a way that is not supportive to your values, or the possibility that the story outrages another person outside of your community so much that he decides to respond by physically threatening the aggressor, or the chance that the media will give the aggressor a forum to justify the abusive behavior. This need to "what-if" an accountability strategy is not meant to discourage the process, but to make sure that organizers are careful to plan for possible outcomes. Your first plan may need to be shifted, modified, and tweaked as you go. You may find that you are working to hold this person accountable for a longer period of time than you expected. There may be a split in your community because of the silence surrounding abuse, especially sexual and domestic violence. You may feel that you are further isolating the survivor and yourselves from the community. Think of the realistic outcomes of your process to hold someone accountable in your community. Your process may not be fully successful or it may yield.

5. Organize *collectively*. It is not impossible to organize an accountability process by one's self, but it is so much more difficult. A group of people is more likely to do a better job of thinking critically about strategies because there are more perspectives and experiences at work. Organizers are less likely to burn out quickly if more than one or two people can share the work as well as emotionally support one another. It is much harder to be targeted by backlash when there is a group of people acting in solidarity with one another. A group of people can hold each other accountable to staying true to the group's shared values. Also, collective organizing facilitates strong community building which undermines isolation and helps to prevent future sexual violence.

6. Make sure everyone in the accountability-seeking group is on the same page with their political analysis of sexual violence. Sometimes members of a community organizing for accountability are not working with the same definition of "rape," the same understanding of concepts like "consent" or "credibility, " or the same assumption that rape is a manifestation of oppression. In order for the group's process to be sustainable and successful, organizers must have a collective

understanding of what rape is and how rape functions in our culture. For example, what if the aggressor and his supporters respond to the organizers' call for accountability by demanding that the survivor prove that she was indeed assaulted or else they will consider her a liar, guilty of slander? Because of our legal structure that is based on the idea of "innocent until proven guilty, " and rape culture that doubts the credibility of women in general, it is a common tactic to lay the burden of proof on the survivor.[6] If the group had a feminist, politicized understanding of rape, they might be able to anticipate this move as part of a larger cultural phenomenon of discrediting women when they assert that violence has been done to them.

This process pushes people to identify rape as a political issue and articulate a political analysisof sexual violence. A shared political analysis of sexual violence opens the door for people to make connections of moments of rape to the larger culture in which rape occurs. A consciousness of rape culture prepares us for the need to organize beyond the accountability of an individual aggressor. We also realize we must organize for accountability and transformation of institutions that perpetuate rape culture such as the military, prisons, and the media.

Lastly, when the aggressor is a progressive activist, a rigorous analysis of rape culture can be connected to that individual's own political interests. A political analysis of rape culture can become the vehicle that connects the aggressor's act of violence to the machinations of oppression in general and even to his own political agenda. Sharing this analysis may also help gain support from the aggressor's activist community when they understand their own political work as connected to the abolition of rape culture and, of course, rape.

7. Be clear and specific about what your group wants from the aggressor in terms of accountability. When your group calls for accountability, it's important to make sure that "accountability" is not simply an elusive concept that folks in the group are ultimately unclear about. Does accountability mean counseling for the aggressor? An admission of guilt? A public or private apology? Or is it specific behavior changes? Here are some examples: You can organize in our community, but you cannot be alone with young people. You can come to our parties, but you will not be allowed to drink. You can attend our church, but you must check in with a specific group of people every week so that they can determine your progress in your reform.

Determining the specific thing that the group is demanding from the aggressor pushes the group to be accountable to its own process. It is very easy to slip into a perpetual rage that wants the aggressor to suffer in general, rather than be grounded in a planning process that identifies specific steps for the aggressor to take. And why not? We are talking about rape, after all, and rage is a perfectly natural and good response. However, though we should make an intentional space to honor rage, it's important for the purposes of an accountability process to have a vision for specific steps the aggressor needs to take in order to give her a chance for redemption. Remember the community we are working to build is not one where a person is forever stigmatized as a "monster" no matter what she does to transform, but a community where a person has the opportunity to provide restoration for the damage she has done.

8. Let the aggressor know your analysis and your demands. This guideline may seem obvious, but we have found that this step is often forgotten! For a number of reasons, including being distracted by the other parts of the accountability process, the aggressor building distance between himself and the

organizers, or the desire for the organizers to be anonymous for fear of backlash, we sometimes do not make a plan to relay the specific steps for accountability to the aggressor. Publicly asserting that the person raped another, insisting that he must be accountable for the act, and convincing others in the community to be allies to your process may all be important aspects of the accountability plan – but they are only the beginning of any plan. Public shaming may be a tool that makes sense for your group, but it is not an end for an accountability process. An aggressor can be shamed, but remain unaccountable for his behavior. Organizers must be grounded in the potential of their own collective power, confident about their specific demands as well as the fact that they are entitled to make demands, and then use their influence to compel the aggressor to make follow through with their demands.

9. Consider help from the aggressor's friends, family, and people close to her. Family and friends can be indispensable when figuring out an accountability plan. Organizers may hesitate to engage the aggressor's close people; assuming that friends and family may be more likely to defend the aggressor against reports that he has done such a horrible thing. This is a reasonable assumption – it's hard to believe that a person we care about is capable of violently exploiting another – but it is worth the time to see if you have allies in the aggressor's close community. They have more credibility with the aggressor, it is harder for her to refuse accountability if she is receiving the demand for accountability from people she cares about, it strengthens your group's united front, and, maybe most interestingly, it may compel the aggressor's community to critically reflect on their own values and cultural norms that may be supporting people to violate others. For example, this may be a community of people that does not tolerate rape, but enjoys misogynist humor or music or doesn't support women in leadership. Engaging friends and family in the accountability process may encourage them to consider their own roles in sustaining rape culture.

Also, the participation of the aggressor's close people ensures long-term follow through with the accountability plan. Friends can check in with him to make sure he is attending counseling, for example. Also, the aggressor may need his own support system. What if the intervention causes the aggressor to fall into a deep suicidal depression? The organizers may not have the desire or the patience to support the aggressor, nor should they need to. However, the aggressor's family and friends can play an important role of supporting the aggressor to take the necessary steps of accountability in a way that is sustainable for everyone.

10. Prepare to be engaged in the process for the long haul. Accountability is a process, not a destination, and it will probably take some time. The reasons why people rape are complicated and it takes time to shift the behavior. Furthermore, community members who want to protect the aggressor may slow down or frustrate organizing efforts. Even after the aggressor takes the necessary steps that your group has identified for him to be accountable, it is important to arrange for long term follow through to decrease the chances of future relapse. In the meantime, it's important for the organizers to integrate strategies into their work that make the process more sustainable for them. For example, when was the last time the group hung out together and didn't talk about the aggressor, rape, or rape culture, but just had fun? Weave celebration and fun into your community, it is also a reflection of the world we want to build.

Also, the change that the organizing group is making is not just the transformation of the particular aggressor, but also the trans-

formation of our culture. If the aggressor's friends and family disparage the group, it doesn't mean that the group is doing anything wrong, it's just a manifestation of the larger problem of rape culture. Every group of people that is working to build a community accountability process must understand that they are not working in isolation, but in the company of an *on-going* vast and rich global movement for liberation.

These principles are merely bones to be used as a framework for a complex, three-dimensional accountability process. Each community is responsible for adding its own distinctive features to make the body of the accountability process its own. What follows is a description of three very different scenarios of community groups struggling with sexual violence and mapping out an accountability plan. These scenarios occurred before the folks at CARA crafted the list of principles above, but were important experiences that gave us the tools we needed to identify important components of accountability work.

### Accountability Scenarios

Scenario One: Dan is a Black man in an urban area who is active in the movement to end racial profiling and police brutality.[7] He is also works with young people to organize against institutional racism at an organization called Youth Empowered. He is well known by progressives and people of color in the area and popular in the community. Over the course of three years, four young Black women (ages 21 and younger) who were being mentored by Dan approached CARA staff with concerns about on-going sexual harassment within their activist community. Sexual harassment tactics reported by the young women included Dan bringing young people that he mentored to strip clubs, approaching intoxicated young women who he mentored to have sex with them, and having conversations in the organizing space about the size of women's genitals as it relates to their ethnicity. The young women also asserted that institutional sexism within the space was a serious problem at Youth Empowered. Young women had fewer leadership opportunities and their ideas were dismissed.

Organizers at CARA met with Dan in an effort to share with him our concerns and begin an accountability process, but he was resistant. Women of color who were Dan's friends, who did not want to believe that Dan was capable of this behavior, chose to protect Dan from being confronted. Instead, several young women were surprised by an unscheduled meeting within Youth Empowered, facilitated by an older woman of color, where they were bullied into "squashing" their concerns about Dan. They were accused of spreading lies and told that they should be grateful for the organizing opportunities afforded to them by Dan. In one of these meetings, a young woman was shown a letter from the police department that criticized Dan about organizing a rally in an attempt to make her critique of Dan's behavior seem divisive to the movement against police brutality. After these meetings, each young woman felt completely demoralized and severed all ties with Youth Empowered.

Black activists have struggled with the tension of patriarchy within our social justice movements since the movement to abolish slavery. Women who identify the problem and try to organize against sexism and sexual violence within our movements are often labeled as divisive, and even as FBI informants. Their work is discredited and they are often traumatized from the experience. As a result, they often do not want to engage in an accountability process, especially when they are not getting support from people they thought were their comrades, including other women of color.

Over the first two years, CARA made several attempts to hold Dan accountable and each effort was a struggle. An attempt to connect with women of color who organized with him only strained the relationship between our organizations. We also realized that our staff members were not on the same page with each other about how to support young women who were aggravated with one organization discussing the problem at our organization. How did that impact our ability to build strategic coalitions with Youth Empowered? How were we going to support the young women to tell their truth without the story descending into a feeling of hopelessness? Was this a problem about Dan or was this a problem with the organizational culture within Youth Empowered?

We realized that it was not enough to recognize Dan's behavior as problematic and try to appeal to the conscience of the people around him. We needed a thoughtful plan supported by everyone in our organization and we needed to identify folks within CARA who would take the necessary leadership to map out the plan for all of us. We decided that the women of color would meet separately from the general CARA membership to develop an analysis and strategy and the rest of CARA would follow their lead. The women of color decided that our struggle with Dan and his behavior had also become an organizational issue for CARA – it was not solely a community issue – and we identified it as such. We named Dan as a person who had ongoing chronic issues with sexual harassment. Surprisingly, this intentional defining of the problem had not yet happened among our staff. We talked about his behavior as problematic, unaccountable, manipulative, but we had not collectively and specifically named it as a form of sexualized violence.

Importantly, we decided that our analysis of his behavior was not secret information. If people in the community asked us our opinion about Dan or disclosed that they were being sexually harassed at Youth Empowered, we decided that our analysis would not be confidential but would be shared in the spirit of sharing information about destructive behavior. In the past we struggled with whether or not sharing this information would be useless or counterproductive gossip. We knew the risk of telling others that a well-known Black man who organized against police violence was responsible for sexualized violence. But we decided that it was safer for our community for us to not allow ourselves to be silenced. It was also safer for Dan if we supported our community to move along in its process of struggling with his behavior and eventually demanding accountability. If our community didn't hold him accountable and compel him to reform his behavior, we worried that he would step over the line with a woman who would not hesitate to report him to the police, which would give the police the ammunition they needed to completely discredit Dan, as well as our movement against police violence. Therefore, we made a decision to tell people the information if they came to us with concerns.

We decided that instead of meeting with all the women of color in Dan's ranks, we would choose one Black woman from CARA to invite one Black woman from Youth Empowered to have a solid, low-drama, conversation. We also asked another Black woman familiar and friendly with both groups and strong in her analysis of sexual violence within Black communities to facilitate the conversation. The woman from Youth Empowered had positive experiences organizing with CARA in the past and, though our earlier conversations about Dan were fraught with tension and defensiveness on all our parts, she was willing to connect with us. The participation of the third woman as a friendly facilitator also helped us to be more relaxed in our conversation.

The first meetings with these women went very well. The CARA representative was clear that her organization's analysis was that Dan had a serious problem with sexual harassment, and we were specifically concerned about the fact that he was working with young people. We were specifically concerned about Dan's engagement with young people because of the power Dan had in choosing which young person would get internships, go to out of town conferences, or receive leadership opportunities. Dan's friend received the information with very little defensiveness and was eager to have more conversations about Dan's behavior. This one-on-one strategy seemed to relax the tension between the two progressive organizations; instead we became three sistas intentionally unpacking the problem of misogyny in our community.

The outcome of these meetings was the healing of the strategic relationship between our organizations, which was important for movement building, but we still had not moved to a place where we could hold Dan accountable. We struggled with the specific thing we wanted to see happen. The women whom he'd sexually harassed were not asking for anything in particular; they understandably just wanted to be left alone. We decided that we did not want him ejected from the activist community, but that it was not safe for him to mentor young people.

It was at this time that a young 17 year old Black woman, Keisha, connected with us through Rashad, a young 17 year old Black man who was organizing both with CARA and with Youth Empowered. (Rashad was referred to CARA through Dan's organization because the rift between the two groups had significantly healed. If we had not accomplished this, Keisha may not have found CARA.) Keisha was an intern at Youth Empowered and had written a four-page letter of resignation that detailed Dan's sexist behavior. The women at CARA listened to Keisha's story, read her letter, and decided to share with her our collective analysis of Dan's behavior. Because Dan is so deeply supported at Youth Empowered, CARA's response helped her feel affirmed and validated. CARA's organizers helped Keisha strategize about sharing the letter at Youth Empowered by asking her what she wanted to achieve, how she wanted to be supported, andwhat she wanted her next steps to be after the meeting.

Keisha read her letter aloud to Youth Empowered members that night, with Rashad acting as her ally. She received some support from some women in the community, but she was also told that her letter was very "high school" and immature by a Black woman within the organization who was also a mentor. Dan pulled Rashad aside after Keisha read her letter and told him that he was making a mistake by organizing with CARA because "those women hate Black men. " It was a very painful event, and yet both Keisha and Rashad felt positive about the fact that they followed through with their plan and publicly revealed the same problems that other young Black women before Keisha had named but privately struggled with.

The Black woman from Youth Empowered who had been engaging with CARA was stunned by Keisha's letter, and quickly organized a meeting with Dan, Keisha, Rashad, her CARA contact, and other Youth Empowered organizers, along with the same Black woman as a facilitator. Keisha and CARA organizers prepared for tactics that Dan and his supporters would use to discredit Keisha. Though each organizer admitted that there was a problem with institutional sexism within Youth Empowered, they belittled the conflict as if it were a misunderstanding between Keisha and Dan. They said she was "acting white" for putting her thoughts on paper and for wanting to resign her in-

ternship. Keisha, being the youngest person at the meeting, was mostly intimidated and silenced by these hurtful tactics. The CARA organizer who was there, however, carefully challenged each attempt to discredit Keisha. We continued to support Keisha during and after this meeting.

Keisha's letter, however, had a strong ripple effect that continued to impact Youth Empowered. The Youth Empowered organizer who had been talking with CARA was moved by Keisha's letter, and committed to figuring out an accountability plan for Dan that made sense for her organization. She began to organize discussions to clarify the issues that included organizers from CARA, Dan, and organizers from Youth Empowered. These conversations were very different than when we had started. We no longer had to convince folks that institutional sexism existed in the organization, or that Dan's behavior was a form of sexualized violence. Dan eventually resigned from his mentorship position at the organization, but we don't know if this was because of the pressure created by Keisha's letter and CARA's stronger connections with women of color at Youth Empowered,. With his absence, the new leadership at Youth Empowered began to more confidently address the institutional sexism issues within the organization.

Although we think that this work has created a safer environment at Youth Empowered, Dan still has not been accountable for his behavior. That is to say, he has not admitted that what he did was wrong or taken steps to reconcile with the people who he targeted at Youth Empowered. However, at the time of writing, we expect that he'll continue to go to these meetings where these conversations about sexual violence (including his own) will be discussed in the context of building a liberation movement for all Black people.

Working The Principles: In the above scenario, CARA organizers utilized many of the community accountability principles discussed above. We were sure to respect the autonomy of the young women. They needed distance from the situation, so we did not pressure them to participate in the often-grueling process. However, we did regularly update them on our progress, keeping the door open if they changed their minds about what they wanted their role to be. In the meantime, we set up support systems for them, making sure we made space for Black women to just relax and talk about our lives instead of spending all of our time processing Dan.

Because the issue was complicated, we planned together as a group, running strategies by one another so that many perspectives and ideas could help improve our work. We also learned from our mistakes and learned to consider more carefully the consequences of strategies such as calling a big meeting rather than strategically working with individuals. Also working with the Black woman from Youth Empowered, a friend and comrade of Dan's, was really critical in bringing Dan closer to the possibility of accountability. Her participation brought important credibility to the questions we were asking.

However, the most important principle that we exercised in this process was taking a step back and making sure we were all on the same page with our analysis of what we were dealing with. Our frustration with Dan was a little sloppy at first – we weren't sure what the problem was. For example, there was a question about whether or not he raped someone, but we had not spoken to this person directly and, therefore, had no real reason to think this was true other than the fact that he was exhibiting other problematic behavior. We had to decide that the behavior that we were sure about was enough for which to demand accountability. The power of naming the problem cannot be

underestimated in this particular scenario. Because the behavior was not intensely violent, such as sexual assault, we were searching for the right to name it as sexualized violence. Sexual harassment often presents this problem. There is no assault, but there are elusive and destructive forms of violence at play including power manipulation, verbal misogynist remarks, and the humiliation of young people. Once we reached consensus in our analysis, we were prepared to receive the opportunity that Keisha's letter and work offered and use it to push the accountability process further along.

Scenario Two: Kevin is a member of the alternative punk music community in an urban area. His community is predominantly young, white, multi-gendered, and includes a significant number of queer folks. Kevin and his close-knit community, which includes his band and their friends, were told by two women that they had been sexually assaulted at recent parties. The aggressor, Lou, was active and well-known in the music community, and he was employed at a popular club. Lou encouraged the women to get drunk and then forced them to have sex against their will. One of the survivors and her friends did a brief intervention with Lou, confronting him in person with the information. She reports that at first he was humbled and apologetic, but, after leaving them, reversed his behavior and began to justify his actions again. Frustrated with Lou's lack of accountability and with sexual violence in the music community in general, Kevin's group began to meet and discuss the situation. They not only reflected on the survivors' experiences, but also how the local culture supported bad behavior. For example, they discussed how a local weekly newspaper, popular in the alternative music community, glamorized the massive amount of drinking that was always prevalent at Lou's parties. Kevin's group decided that there was a real lack of consciousness about the issue of sexual violence and the community needed to be woken up. To that end, they designed fliers that announced Lou's behavior and his identity, asserted the need for Lou's accountability as directed by the survivors, included a critique of the newspaper, and suggested boycotting Lou's club. With the survivors' consent, the group then passed the fliers out at places where members of their community usually congregated.

A couple of weeks later, the newspaper published an article defending Lou by implying that, since the women that he allegedly assaulted had not pressed criminal charges, the allegations could not be that credible. Kevin's group realized that they needed to do a lot of re-education about sexual violence within the music community. At the same time, they were being pressured by Lou with threats to sue for libel. The group had not planned for this possible outcome, but instead of backing off, they re-grouped and used anonymous e-mail and the internet to protect their identities.[8]

They proceeded to write a powerful document that shared the survivors' experiences (written by the survivors), defined sexual violence, and addressed issues of consent and victim-blaming. Using a mixture of statistics and analysis, they challenged the criminal legal system as an effective source for justice, thereby undermining the newspaper's absurd assertion that sexual violence can only be taken seriously if the survivor reports it to the police. Most importantly, the group clearly articulated what they meant by community accountability. With permission, we have reprinted their definition of accountability below:

> *We expect that the sexual perpetrator be held accountable for their actions and prevented from shifting blame onto the survivor. We expect that the perpetrator own their assaultive behavior and understand the full ramifications their actions have and will continue*

*to have on the survivor and the community. The perpetrator must illustrate their compliance by making a public apology and, with the help of their peers, seek counseling from a sexual assault specialist. It is equally important that they inform future partners and friends that they have a problem and ask for their support in the healing process. If the perpetrator moves to a new community, they must continue to comply with the community guidelines set forth above. We believe that by working with the perpetrator in the healing process, we can truly succeed in making our community safer.*[9]

They released their full statement to the press and also posted it to a website. The statement had an important impact. A reporter from the popular weekly newspaper contacted them and admitted that the statement compelled her to rethink some of her ideas about sexual violence. It also kindled a conversation in the larger music community about sexual violence and accountability.

Other than making threats of a lawsuit to the group, Lou mostly ignored the group until the boycott of the club where he worked started to gain steam. Soon, bands from out of town also began to avoid playing at the club. This pressure compelled Lou to engage in a series of e-mail discussions with Kevin with the goal of negotiating a face-to-face meeting. Engaging through email was a difficult and frustrating process. Lou was consistently defensive and wanted "mediation. " Kevin was clear about his group's analysis and goals and wanted accountability. Eventually, they gave up on setting a meeting because they couldn't agree on terms.

Throughout this process, Kevin's group experienced a great deal of exhaustion and frustration. During the periodic meetings that CARA staff had with Kevin for support and advice, he often expressed feeling really tired of the project of engaging with Lou at all. Slowly, Kevin and his group switched tactics and focused more on community building, education, and prevention. It's a critical shift to decide to use your resources to build the community you want rather than expend all of your resources by fighting the problem you want to eliminate. They began a process of learning more about sexual violence, safety, and accountability. They hosted benefits for CARA and other anti-violence organizations. They prepared themselves to facilitate their own safety and accountability workshops. They did all of this with the faith that they could transform their music community to reach a set of values that were consistent with being fun, sexy, and liberatory and explicitly anti-rape and anti-oppression.

Working the Principles: Similarly to the first scenario, this community engaged in some trial and error and learned a lot about different strategies. They were careful to check in with survivors about each of their strategies. It's important to note that one survivor changed her role as the process continued. At first, she was the main person who drove the initial confrontation with Lou. As the group pressured Lou more indirectly, she chose to stay on the sideline. The group did a good job of being flexible with her shifting role.

The fact that the group worked collectively was also very critical. We had the impression that sometimes their work was more collectively driven and sometimes only one or two people were the main organizers. When only one or two people were doing the work, it was clear that the process lost some sustainability. However, we must also reflect a lot of compassion on the reality that some folks who initially began to organize realized down the line that they needed stronger boundaries between themselves and the process. In terms of planning, it may be helpful to do ongoing self-checks to note how the work may be triggering one's own experience of surviving violence or to determine if one just generally has a low capacity for doing this *kind*

of accountability work. Perhaps the type of strategy is not a good match for the culture of the group. As this group moved into a different direction that focused more on raising consciousness and building stronger community connections, we noticed a significant revival in the energy of the organizers.

Finally, we think that the most important principle that made a difference in this community's work was when they presented a critical analysis of sexual violence and rape culture to the larger community of rock musicians and alternative artists. It seemed important to sap the arrogance of the newspaper's uncritical defense of Lou, given how much influence the newspaper has within the larger community. We also think that creating and sharing the statement was important in light of the group's flyering strategy. There's very little one can say on a flyer and sexual violence can be very complicated. Their statement did a great job of demonstrating the full dimension of sexual violence by weaving in the survivors' voices in their own words, using statistical information to show why people do not believe survivors, and presenting a liberatory vision of accountability and justice.

Some members of the community may regret that they were ultimately unable to compel Lou to follow their demands. However, CARA feels that it's not unreasonable to think that their work did have a significant impact on Lou. After experiencing the full force of collective organizing which asserted that his behavior was unacceptable, we venture to guess that Lou might be less likely to act in manipulative and abusive ways. In any case, we think their work may have also compelled other members of the community to think critically about the way in which consent operates in their sexual encounters, which is important work in preventing future sexual violence. Also, it's important to remember that this community did in fact stay with their accountability process for the long-haul – they now simply have their sights set higher than Lou.

Scenario Three: Marisol is a young, radical Chicana activist who organizes with CARA as well as the local chapter of a national Chicano activist group, Unido. While attending an overnight, out of- town conference with Unido, a young man, Juan, sexually assaulted her. When she returned home, she shared her experience with organizers at CARA. She told us how hurt and confused she felt as a result of the assault, especially since it happened in the context of organizing at Unido. The organizers validated her feelings and supported her to engage in a healing process. We then began to talk with her more about Unido to get a better grasp on the culture of the organization as a whole and if they had the tools to address sexual violence as a problem in their community.

Marisol realized that she needed to discuss the problem with other young women at Unido. Through conversations with them, she learned that Juan had an on-going pattern of sexually assaulting other young women organizing with Unido. She found three other women who had had similar experiences with the same activist. This information led Marisol to organize an emergency meeting with the women of Unido to discuss the problem. At this meeting, she learned that this behavior had been happening for years and women before her tried to address it and demand that Juan be ejected from the position of power he possessed within the organization. However, though Unido's leadership had talked to the Juan about his behavior, there was no real follow-up and no consequences.

The young Chicanas of Unido decided to devise a plan to confront Unido's largely male leadership about the problem of sexual violence in general and Juan's behavior specifi-

cally. Identifying the criminal system as a real problem in their community, they did not want to pursue law enforcement-based responses. Also, Marisol did not want the episode to end with Unido simply isolating the aggressor without resolving Juan's abusive behavior. The young women decided on a plan that included demanding that Juan step down from leadership positions in Unido, that he pursue counseling and that his friends support him to go to appropriate counseling, and that Unido pursue intensive educational work on sexual violence.

The women's collective strength and demands were so powerful, that Unido's leadership agreed to remove Juan from Unido's ranks and to sponsor trainings on sexual violence not just within Unido's local Seattle chapter, but prioritize the issue throughout Unido's national agenda. The workshop curriculum focused on the connection between liberation for Mexicans and Chicanos and the work of ending sexual violence.

Also, because of the help of his friends and community, Juan was supported to go to culturallyspecific counseling addressing power and control issues, particularly for aggressors of sexual violence. Marisol also worked to build a strong community of support for herself and other survivors within Unido. Eventually she decided it was better for her health to create a boundary between herself and this particular chapter of Unido, but after a year's break, she is organizing with another chapter of Unido. There, she is incorporating a consciousness of sexual violence and misogyny into the local chapter's political agenda.

Working the Principles: Compared to the other two scenarios, this scenario had a pretty short timeline. While the first scenario has taken over two years (so far!), the second scenario has been happening for a little over a year, the third lasted for a mere two months. One reason is the 14 ease in which a strong accountability process can be facilitated when the community is a specific group of people rather than an unstructured and informal group. If there is a system of accountability within the community that is already set up, organizers can maximize that tool to facilitate an accountability process for sexual violence.

Interestingly, organizers at Unido previously attempted to hold the aggressor accountable using the same means, but their demands were not taken seriously. We think the attempt led by Marisol was more successful for two reasons. First, survivors were backed up by a collective of people instead of just a few folks. This lent credibility and power to the group of organizers as they approached Unido's leadership. Second, the organizers were clearer about what they wanted to see happen with Juan as well as with Unido. Instead of a vague call for accountability, the women asserted specific steps that they wanted Juan and Unido to take. This clarity helped pressure Unido to meet the challenge by complying with the specific demands that the women called for.

Also, the fact that Juan's friends agreed to support him to attend counseling was a great success. Support from friends and family is perhaps one of the most effective ways to ensure that aggressors attend counseling if that is the goal. They can be more compassionate because they love the person, they are more integrated in the person's life, and they have more credibility with the person. Support from the aggressor's friends and family can be a precious resource in securing an aggressor's follow through with an accountability process.

## A Note On Credibility

We hope that the above scenarios reveal the "jazziness" often needed for a community to

negotiate itself through a complex process that has multiple components. While organizers should be committed to some fundamental political principles (womanism/feminism, anti-racism, proqueer, etc.), and can build on the organizing principles we have listed above, the context of any situation will likely be complex, and therefore organizers must also be flexible enough to modify and improve tactics as the process unfolds.

To underscore the need for jazziness, we want to briefly explore a problem that comes up frequently in community accountability work: how do the community and the organizers think about the *credibility* of survivors and of aggressors? Because of oppression, people of color, women, young people, queer people, and people with disabilities are often not believed when telling their stories of being violated and exploited. In our first scenario, for example, one of the Black women who experienced sexual harassment wasn't believed because of the racialized and gendered stereotypes of Black women as promiscuous. For this reason, the wider feminist antiviolence community has a principle of always believing women if they report being sexually violated.

CARA also leans in this direction, but we do not do so uncritically. We try to develop a process of *engagement* with a person's story of being violated, rather than thinking of the process as a *fact-finding mission* with an end goal of determining the Objective Truth of What Really Happened. It is almost impossible to prove a sexual assault happened – and when it is possible, it is incredibly time and resource-consuming. The reality is that a perfectly accurate account of an incidence of sexual violence is difficult to attain. Though everyone has an obligation to recount their experience as accurately as they can, sometimes survivors do not get every detail right or their story may be inconsistent. That's understandable – the experience of sexual violence can be extremely traumatic, and trauma can impact a person's memory and perception. Furthermore, the 15 person's age or disability may impact their capacity to convey their story with perfect accuracy. This does not necessarily undermine their credibility. Sometimes aggressors can have what seems to be a very polished account of what happened. That does not necessarily mean that they ought to be believed.[10]

As a strategy to step around this problem of credibility, we implement a jazzy method that demands an intentional engagement of organizers with the people and the context of the situation. Organizers are not objective, coolly detached receivers of a report; rather, they are helping to build and create the way to think about what happened and what should happen next.

Critically engaging an account of sexual assault means to actively consider it in multiple contexts. For example, we come to this work with an understanding that we live in a culture in which sexual violence is, sadly, a regular occurrence. We consider how institutional oppression informs people's choices within the situations in question. We look at people's patterns of behavior. We think about other information that we know about the community in which the violence happened that may be helpful. Because we understand that we are also not objective, we reflect on how our own biases might be informing the way in which we perceive information and whether this is helpful or not. We help each other think critically around hard corners of the story so that our analysis doesn't become narrow or develop in isolation. In short, we critically engage the story to come up with our best assessment of important pieces of the story and then develop a plan to address the situation based on solid political values and organizing principles.

## Conclusion

Given the intensity of addressing sexual violence in a community, naming an aggressor will almost necessarily cause some community upheaval and hurt. We urge people organizing for community accountability to be prepared for the risks involved in leading a community accountability process. This work will be hard and messy, but it is also work that is vital, deeply liberatory, meaningful, and geared towards movement building. Engaging with communities to do this work helps to reconnect people to one another, potentially strengthening our relationships and making our communities more resilient and prepared for other political work. Instead of depending on institutions to support us - institutions that will often respond oppressively if they respond at all - community accountability work helps us to develop a practice of liberation in our personal lives, our community lives, and our political lives. Revolutionary movement building will only happen if we can build the systems and practices that affirm our liberation-based values of connection, agency, respect, self-determination, and justice. Community accountability work provides us with a critical opportunity to transform our relationships and communities to reflect these liberatory values. ▮

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

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

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

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

[5] Thank you to the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse for asserting the verb in "safety plan."

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

[7] All names of people and organizations have been changed for the purposes of this article, not because we are concerned about the legal ramifications of slander or because we have a blanket rule about confidentiality, but because we try to be intentional about when and for what reason we publicly identify aggressors.

[8] Those of us working on community accountability should have a talk about aggressors' threats of suing for slander and libel. These threats happen often, especially if the aggressor is well-known and has a reputation to defend. However, when suing for slander or libel, one has the burden of proof and must be able to demonstrate that the allegations are false. It's very hard to prove that something is false, especially when it's, in fact, true. Still, the threat of a lawsuit can understandably be frightening and it would be helpful to have more conversations about what the actual danger is and perhaps develop some

best practices when considering using public disclosure as a tool to reach
accountability.

[9] Press Release, January 25, 2003

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