

Six key messages about sexual violence in UK activist communities

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The Salvage research project listens to survivors of activist sexual violence: here's what they've learned.



Credit: Salvage project/Emma Thacker.

We sit down with a cup of tea in a kitchen, a living room or a social centre. Sometimes we know each other, sometimes this is the first time we've met face to face. I take out the recorder. The red light goes on. We laugh, we cry, we get angry, sad, hopeful, optimistic and disillusioned.

We begin to create a language to talk about that which we have kept silent: ongoing abuse, sexual assault and rape in the 'radical' and 'revolutionary' activist spaces and networks within the UK left.

Since August 2015 I have been interviewing survivors for the [Salvage research project](#). We are an unfunded collective of researchers, survivors and activists (some of us are all three) who aim to create knowledge and develop a network of survivors to work towards creating effective challenges to heterosexism within activist communities.

The UK left has been shaken by the controversial treatment of survivors who accused white cisgender men activist stars, like Martin Smith of the [Socialist Worker's Party](#) and Steve Hedley of the [National Union Of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers](#), of sexual and domestic violence. Survivors who spoke

out and demanded justice were subjected to disbelief, harassment and victim blaming and were pressured to leave these organisations. Meanwhile the alleged abusers avoided accountability and continue to hold prominent positions in the left.

Subsequently, interest in 'survivor-led' tactics, such as safer spaces policies and accountability processes, has grown. [Safer spaces policies](#) consist of a list of principles that are drawn up and agreed for a particular event, place or organisation on what behaviours and speech-acts are oppressive and what the consequences will be for people who continue to use such language and behaviour (for example, they might be asked to leave the space). These principles are based on non-oppressive practice that recognises the harms of various microaggressions, e.g. racism, sexism, transphobia, in everyday life, based in peoples' lived experiences.

Accountability processes have been developed by black feminist communities in North America to address violence in their communities without recourse to the criminal justice system ([INCITE!](#) are a good example). They involve a community coming together around a specific situation of violence to challenge the abuser and support the survivor. A working group come up with practical strategies to make the survivor safer and support the abuser to take responsibility for their harmful behaviour. This collective work aims to create and maintain an activist community that is better able to recognise and challenge violence.

At the same time, this interest has been echoed by outspoken critiques of safer spaces and accountability processes including [Anonymous Refused](#), [Weekly Worker](#) and The Solidarity Collective. Survivor-led tactics are sometimes dismissed as exclusionary, as oppressive, as capitalist and neo-liberal, as open to exploitation by power-hungry individuals with vendettas, or a conspiracy to dismantle the left. The [manarchist](#) message to survivors has been clear: shut up, or else we will come up with a series of reasons to not believe you, and continue to do nothing to address the harmful culture of the left.

We started the [Salvage collective](#) shortly after I facilitated a workshop on survivor-led challenges to sexual violence in activist communities at [AFem 2014](#). Held the day after the London Anarchist Bookfair in October 2014, AFem2014 was an anarcha-feminist conference with sessions organised by people of colour, queer and trans people, sex workers, disabled people and survivors of sexual violence that aimed to critically discuss oppression experienced within anarchist organising.

The room was heaving with bodies, tension and desperation for definitions, solutions and answers. It was overwhelming. If only there was a one-size fits all safer space policy. If only there was one accountability process that actually worked.

I am not sure if we have really even started to talk about and make sense of what abuse looks and feels like in the fabric of our activist lives. Without illuminating and challenging the gendered power relations embedded within everyday activism how can we expect to simply *[insert a policy or process here]* and get positive results? How can we honour the experiences of survivors, challenge silence and begin to build spaces and tactics to resist harm without recourse to punitive or moral forms of regulation?

The Salvage research project, which is still ongoing, seeks to listen to and value the perspectives and stories of survivors who have experienced sexual violence within our activist communities. The 10 survivors interviewed so far have come from all walks of activism including anti-capitalism, anarchism, feminism, queer politics, environmental and animal rights, DIY cultures, protest camps, and autonomous social centres, housing co-ops and squats.

This is not an isolated issue confined to a handful of groups and organisations. Survivors include women, trans and non-binary people who have been abused by cis men, women, trans and non-binary people in heterosexual, same-sex and queer sexual situations, friendships and relationships. When I listened to what survivors say, think and experience, what I heard often contradicted common assumptions of survivors as vengeful or as over-reacting.

Here are a few key messages that have emerged from our research with sexual violence survivors within activist communities so far:

1. Survivors are everywhere

Many survivors come to activism with histories of abuse, in previous relationships, in their childhood and their family. Given the statistics on how common it is for [women](#), [non-binary](#) and [transgender](#) people to experience violence and abuse, we need to assume that survivors make up a significant proportion of our movements.

2. You don't expect it to happen

The rhetorics of activism as a space of equality, belonging, trust and family can be particularly seductive for survivors. We crave places that are non-hierarchical, inclusive and work by consensus. Where everyone is heard. It is the last place that you expect to experience abuse and it becomes incredibly hard to name what is happening as abuse.

How can someone who describes themselves as a feminist and is supportive of safer spaces be abusing you? You haven't been hit, so why are you feeling so powerless and unworthy? Everybody is free to be sexual and have a good time so why aren't you into it? It can take you years to name what is happening to you.

3. You can't just get over it

Betrayals and breaches of trust can have devastating and long-lasting consequences. Friendships may end, community can disappear, you can become isolated, you become nothing, you may be harassed online, made homeless, unable to work or leave the house, your mental health can get worse and you may try to kill yourself. If you survive that, you may be unable to love or trust again. You question yourself. You think about your abuser and re-run scenarios in your head every day even though it happened over 10 years ago.

Panic and fear takes you over when you hear a knock at the door, your phone rings, someone says their name, or you bump into them at an event. The feeling that nobody would believe you if you tried to even explain how you are doing. A friend asks you 'how are you?' and you say 'yeah I'm fine'.

4. You don't want to detract from the cause

Some survivors feel pressured to abandon what are considered to be private interpersonal issues to ensure unity in the fight for 'the cause'. Anything that takes time away from 'the cause' is an unwanted distraction. You are so tired from fighting 'the cause' that you feel unable to bring it up. You can already see the eye-rolls. The meeting has already run over. We need to be united and not let our personal differences distract us from the real enemy. However, as one survivor put it, 'the personal shit is the cause'. How we treat each other in our communities has huge political ramifications. How are we going to transform society if we are a mere microcosm of the social inequalities we are supposed to contest? The silence we are expected to keep around this hypocrisy is very political.

5. You are worried about being excluded and ostracised if you admit harming someone

In activism we explore ethical positions. Ways in which we can improve the world. We invest time and energy to work towards social change. It becomes part of our identity, we come to believe that we are good and we strive to be better, to be the ideal activist. To be accused of harm threatens the foundations of our identities. It is a scary thing. It is easier to do nothing, to reject it, to disengage from the accountability process, to deny and minimize it, and blame the abuse on someone or something else. Meaningful engagement with the harm that you have done to someone means that you can no longer be an ideal activist. Admitting that you made a mistake as a friend, bystander or comrade by colluding with an abuser can also tarnish your status and social standing as an activist.

Letting go of the ideal activist can open up our communities to recognise, talk through and engage with the complexities and contradictions that make us human beings. We cannot step outside of power. Discussing imperfections and harmful behaviours may also challenge the shunning and shaming of abusers and those who collude with them. If we are capable of choosing harm we are capable of choosing something different. Some survivors are compassionate about those who have harmed them and simply want them to stay in the community and just stop being harmful. Refusing to engage with or derail a process can create more harm for the survivor. It consolidates our worst fears: you do not believe us and we are not valued in the activist community.

6. *This matters*

In an era of deepening austerity with disproportional impacts on the marginalised in society the transformative power of social movements depends on its ability to empower and engage with those who experience abuses of power, including sexual violence survivors.

When I asked survivors to reflect on their activism, I was floored by those who said they were most proud of *surviving* activism, of getting out more or less intact. That is not good enough. Activism should be a place to empower survivors, not a space in which your expectations are gradually eroded, culminating in a hope that one day you can put the whole thing behind you.

The urgency of this often erupts in passionate debates about safer spaces policies and accountability processes; but survivor-led understandings of gendered harms in activist cultures are much less heard. As a collective we are passionate about working with survivors to put our findings into activist practice. We hope to be part of a wider cultural shift to challenge harms within our social justice movements and we hope that you can join us too.

If you are experiencing or have experienced sexual violence and need help or support:

Women (self-identified)

Rape Crisis: 0808 802 9999

LGBTQ

Galop: 020 7704 2040

Men

5 million men helpline: 0808 800 5008

If you feel you may be harming someone or have harmed someone and want help:

Respect helpline: 0808 802 4040

Note on services: Services for survivors and abusers have been subjected to severe cuts and closures and have been unable develop their services to fully meet the needs of LGBTQ, non-binary, BAMER, sex workers and BDSM communities. This is an issue that the Salvage collective aims to do more work and activism on.