

OUT OF CONTROL

MISOGYNIST VIOLENCE AND ITS APOLOGISTS

— BAMBOO & ALI

WE LIVE IN A CULTURE where men's violence against women is rampant and thus far the Aotearoa anarchist movement has failed to be a safe space from this violence.

There have been countless incidents of anarchist men perpetrating violence against women. Women have been beaten so badly by their partners that they've had to be hospitalised. Women have been raped by anarchist comrades they knew and trusted. Women have been subjected to ongoing psychological manipulation and abuse within romantic relationships.

It makes you wonder: how many women have to be beaten or sexually assaulted for the whole anarchist and leftist community to give a fuck about gender violence? To take feminist practices seriously? To hold perpetrators accountable for abuse? To wholeheartedly support the survivors of abuse instead of blaming them?

Sometimes it seems like sexism is so ingrained in Western culture that people intuitively condone sexualised violence or partner abuse. It's not even that people don't know about it, or that it's a particularly taboo topic. There is a wilful silence by most men in the anarchist and left movement. It's hard to identify exactly why there is such an unwillingness to take a strong stand against gender violence and partner abuse. Is it because it's seen

TRIGGER WARNING: Some content may be triggering if you have experienced gender violence or abuse.

IMAGES: ROSIE



as a secondary issue to more important 'public' political issues? Is it because relationship abuse is still considered part of the 'private sphere,' and it's none of our business what goes on in somebody's personal relationships or in their homes?

Intimate Partner Abuse is a political issue, rape is a political issue. Both are about power and control within a wider context of (hetero)sexist gender expectations and male privilege. Abuse is not just physical assault, it's not just sexual assault; it's a matrix of emotional abuse and manipulation, verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, intimidation, isolation and control. Intimate Partner

This is a cyclical pattern of behaviour. This is the product of a society that privileges White heterosexual cis-men. This is political.

Yet so many anarchist men do not make fighting against abuse a core priority. It becomes secondary to class exploitation or state political violence (if it is even on the agenda at all).

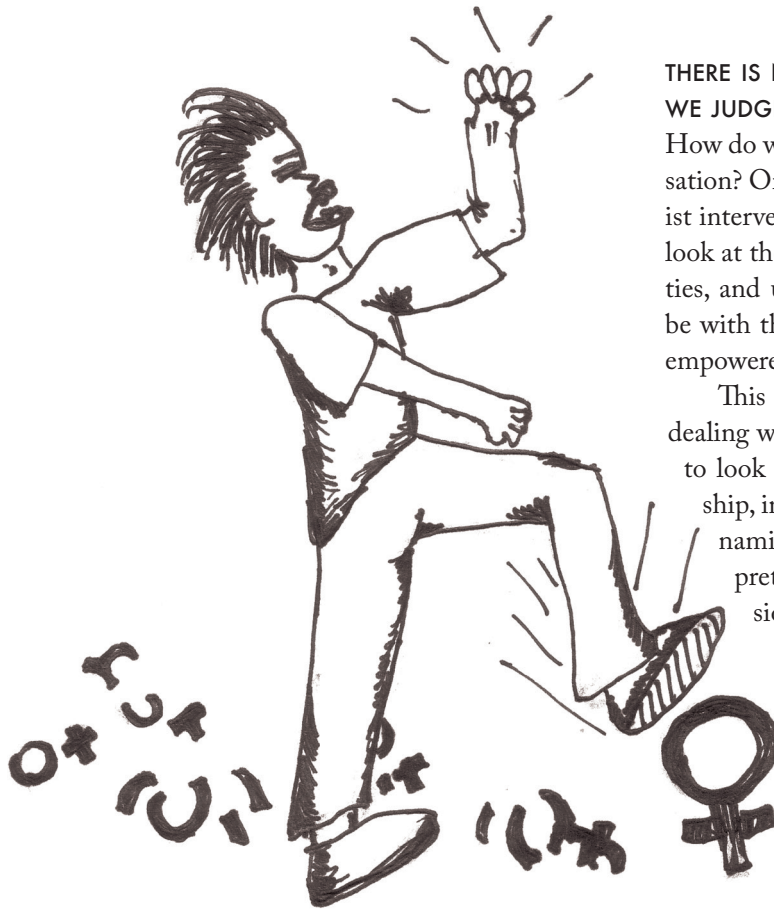
These attitudes set the feminist and womanist movements back decades. That this culture of violence is not taken seriously amongst people we thought were comrades, just goes to show the continued disrespect so many male anarchists have for womyn's liberation.

Abuse is not just physical assault, it's not just sexual assault; it's a matrix of emotional abuse and manipulation, verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, intimidation, isolation and control. [...] there is a **recurring pattern** of men abusing women within the *anarchist and broad left movement*, and there's also a recurring pattern of anarchists and leftists ignoring the **relationship between gendered power dynamics and abuse.**



Abuse doesn't only occur in heterosexual relationships, and it is not only perpetrated by men against women. But there is a recurring pattern of men abusing women within the anarchist and broad left movement, and there's also a recurring pattern of anarchists and leftists ignoring the relationship between gendered power dynamics and abuse. These are components of an unequal power relationship of domination and subordination.

We'd like to address some of the arguments that anarchist men have used to minimize horrific abuse that women have been through, or to shift the blame away from the perpetrator of violence and onto the woman against whom that violence was perpetrated.



IT'S 'HE SAID, SHE SAID'

Most instances of abuse and oppression are a case of '(s)he said, (s)he said,' whether that's a police officer claiming he didn't assault a protestor, the US military claiming they don't torture prisoners in Iraq, or a company claiming they don't pay their workers poverty wages. In all of these instances the person (or group) that has more power, privilege and status is better equipped to get their side of the story heard, and more likely to be believed. But those of us who oppose abuse and oppression can't stand aside because we're not sure whose side of the story to believe. We need to have an analysis of power and how it is gendered when we decide how to respond to allegations of abuse.

THERE IS NO 'OBJECTIVE TRUTH' SO HOW CAN WE JUDGE IF AN ACT CONSTITUTES ABUSE?

How do we judge if something constitutes colonisation? Or capitalist exploitation? Or an imperialist intervention? We have to look at the situation, look at the power dynamics between the two parties, and understand that our solidarity needs to be with those who have been oppressed and disempowered.

This is just as true when the situation we're dealing with is sexual or intimate abuse. We need to look at the power dynamics of the relationship, in the context of the gendered power dynamics of our culture. If we stand aside and pretend to be neutral we're allowing oppression to continue.

IT WAS A MUTUALLY ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

This argument is often used to minimise abuse perpetrated within a relationship. Often when a woman who is being abused by her partner tries to defend herself, or assert her autonomy within the relationship, she is accused of being just as abusive as he is. Relationship abuse needs to be understood in the context of the ongoing power dynamics of the relationship, not as isolated incidents. Women who are being abused are often criticised for responding in ways that don't seem rational or constructive. It's important to remember that when a person is being controlled, manipulated and intimidated it's difficult for them to work out the most constructive, rational way to respond. It's not okay to blame abuse on the person being abused because she did not respond the way you think she should've.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO BELIEVE, HE'S MY FRIEND

We all want to be loyal to our friends. But if your friend is perpetuating oppression, will you really look away for the sake of friendship? Would you take the same stance if your friend was a police officer? a soldier? a union busting employer? a member of an organised hate group? Is it easier to disregard a friend's abuse of women because you don't see it as a political issue in the same way?

If someone is really your friend then you should be able to challenge him on behaviour that perpetuates oppression. It's important that people are challenged on abusive and sexist behaviour by people they respect. It's also important to support people to change their oppressive behaviour. But if your friendship with someone is stopping you from challenging his abuse of others, then you need to re-evaluate your friendship and your principles.

BUT SHE'S CRAZY

First of all, it's hardly surprising that being abused would affect someone's mental health. Secondly, having a mental illness doesn't mean that a woman deserves to be beaten, or that it is her fault she was assaulted. This argument isn't only misogynist, it also stigmatises people with mental health problems. The subtext here is that women are hysterical and irrational and therefore their words can't be trusted.

IF HE COMMITTED A CRIMINAL OFFENCE THEN IT'S A MATTER FOR THE POLICE

From an anarchist perspective, it's not relevant whether something is 'a criminal offense.' We don't recognise the authority of the State over any other part of our lives, why would we let it decide whether or not a survivor of abuse deserves support?

It's important that if a woman chooses to use the state criminal justice system to deal with abuse

her choice is respected. There are so few resources available for stopping abuse. The state criminal justice system is far from an ideal way to address abuse, but in some situations it might be the best option available, and it's up to the person who was abused to make that choice.

There's a number of reasons that survivors of abuse choose not to involve the police. For one thing, the state criminal justice system is based on an ethic of punishment; it is not equipped to support abusers to stop abusing, or to support survivors to heal from abuse. Going through the criminal justice system, which treats survivors as if they are the guilty party, is incredibly painful and traumatic for a lot of women. Especially if they are anarchists or radical activists and have a negative relationship with the police. Additionally, many survivors choose not to involve the police out of compassion for the person who abused them, because they don't want him to have to deal with the police and courts.

HE OPENLY ADMITS WHAT HE DID

It's important that a perpetrator of abuse is open and honest about what he's done. It's the first step towards accountability. But it doesn't mean that the person he abused will suddenly feel safe around him, and she doesn't owe it to him to forgive him.

Often an abuser will openly admit that he did something wrong, but his story is a diluted version of what actually happened. For example, 'I abused her emotionally, but I didn't rape her' or 'I hit her, but it was only once and I wasn't abusive in the rest of the relationship.' It's also not unusual for an abuser to shift the blame onto the person he abused. For example, 'she told me to stop, but she didn't fight me off, so how could I know she didn't want to have sex?' Both of these are tactics used to minimise abuse. That's not what being accountable for your actions means.



YOU'RE DIVIDING THE LEFT

Actually what divides the left isn't women standing up to men who abuse them. What divides the left is those men who fight for their own liberation from capitalism and the State, but want to hold on to their male privilege. Sexism and violence against women divides the left. Men who abuse women are dividing the left, and so are those people who defend them instead of showing solidarity with women who've been abused.

HE'S NOT GOING TO ASSAULT ANYONE AT AN EVENT OR PUBLIC SPACE, SO THERE'S NO NEED TO EXCLUDE HIM

Even if it is unlikely that an abuser will pose a physical threat to women in a social setting, the effects of abusive behaviour are long-term for the person on the receiving end of that abuse. A survivor of abuse will often feel triggered if she has to see the person who abused her. Often survivors of abuse will avoid attending events or going to public spaces in order to avoid the abuser which reinforces the social isolation that abuse creates. Dominating communal spaces is one way that an abuser continues to control the person he abused even after she's left the relationship and cut her connections with him.

HE'S BEEN TO COUNSELLING OR ANTI-VIOLENCE EDUCATION SO THE MATTER'S BEEN RESOLVED

Seeking help to stop being abusive is a good start. But just because someone is receiving counselling to stop being abusive, doesn't automatically mean that he won't repeat that behaviour in future. Even

if a previously abusive person has received help and completely stopped his abusive behaviour, that doesn't mean the people he abused, or their supporters, will feel safe around him. Part of being accountable for your actions is understanding the fact that those you hurt may never completely heal from what happened, and respecting their needs. None of us has the right to decide for someone else that the person who abused her has done enough and his past abusive behaviour is no longer relevant.

CONCLUSION

Misogynist violence is out of control on the left. The response from too many activists is minimising, blaming, denying and ignoring, and it seems to get worse with each new incident. Most of the time community responses to abuse have been a continuation of the emotional abuse already inflicted by the abuser. For example, there have been situations where people deliberately excluded a survivor of intimate partner violence from social events so the person who abused her could feel comfortable attending. This can't keep happening!

We all need to support survivors of sexual and intimate abuse. We need to challenge misogyny. That means understanding the different ways misogyny manifests in behaviour, speech, body language, perceptions, in group dynamics and so on. We need to learn not to dominate, abuse or manipulate other people.

And we need to make it a serious priority, or we'll never succeed in building a world free from oppression. ■