

# off our backs

a women's newsjournal

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letter to the anti-rape movement

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# letter to the anti-rape movement

This is an open letter to the anti-rape movement. We, the members of Santa Cruz Women Against Rape, are writing this letter because we are concerned about the direction the anti-rape movement is taking. While we have many concerns, some of which are expressed in this letter, we would primarily like to address the issue of the relationship of the anti-rape movement to the criminal justice system. The reasons we are interested in this issue have a lot to do with how we see ourselves as a Women Against Rape group. We are a political group that focuses on the issue of rape and violence against women, and that is working towards the long range goal of a radical transformation of the very basis of our society. We do not believe that rape can end within the present capitalist, racist, and sexist structure of our society. The fight against rape must be waged simultaneously with the fight against all other forms of oppression.

When the organized movement against rape first started about five years ago, most of the anti-rape groups were collectives of feminists, who came together because of their anger at the way the police and the courts treated rape victims.<sup>1</sup> These groups (and ours was among them) were primarily political. We were critics of the police, the courts, and the hospitals, the institutions that traditionally dealt with rape victims. Their awful treatment of women became a topic in the media, largely due to the efforts of the women's movement against rape. In a snowballing fashion, many other anti-rape groups formed. Many of these groups, however, did not consider themselves political, nor even feminist.<sup>2</sup> They considered themselves service groups, who wanted "to help rape victims". They felt that the criminal justice system and the anti-rape movement had a common cause, "to get rapists off the street". Therefore, these groups tended to encourage or cajole women to report rapes to the police.

The more explicitly political groups were frustrated, both by the ineffectiveness and unresponsiveness of the criminal justice system, and because of the increasing rape rate. While many remained critical of the criminal justice system in theory, most groups felt it was important to work on building or improving relationships with the police and other criminal justice agencies. They hoped that this would lead to increased prosecution and conviction of rapists. In attempts by anti-rape groups to build good relations with the criminal justice system, criticism of these agencies has been withheld, or dealt with through police channels instead of by applying outside pressure (e.g. through the media, demonstrations, etc.). This tendency to work with the criminal justice system is reinforced by the fact that many groups are supported through government funds. Because of this, there is an inevitable push--if not out-right contractual obligation--to persuade women to report rapes to the police.

## a choice?

Many groups claim that they are neutral about reporting a rape to the police; they say they neither push a woman into it, nor tell her she shouldn't report. Their literature and phone counseling is biased toward giving women information on how to report a rape and what the police and hospital procedures are. They don't present any other options besides going to the police or doing nothing. Therefore, if a woman feels that she'd like to do something about her rape, but the only thing she is told about is the police, her probable choice would be to go to the police. Because there aren't many other alternatives, we support the right of individual rape victims to go through the criminal justice system. We don't feel that she should be forced or pushed into anything, whether reporting or not reporting a rape to the police. But as anti-rape groups, we have the responsibility to expose the function, and challenge the process, of the criminal justice system. Attempts at "good relations" with the criminal justice system have served to co-opt our movement, and have led to the belief (or hope) that the criminal justice system can solve the problem of rape. Yet, the sexist and racist nature of the criminal justice system only makes the problem worse.

We are opposed to the criminal justice system orientation of many anti-rape groups for a number of reasons. The criminal justice system has shown itself to be unresponsive and insensitive to the needs of women. The ordeal of reporting a rape and seeing it through trial is made painful and degrading. Even if the individuals involved try to be pleasant and helpful, the processes and structure of the entire system remain hostile and unsupportive to rape victims. This is largely because the women involved have no power in the process: it is the police that decide if she was "really raped", the DA often decides that it isn't a "good case" so won't prosecute, and juries hesitate to convict a rapist.



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## keeping the end in sight

It is true that the conviction rate for rapists is very low. This is largely due to sexism and the sexist myths about rape in our culture. We abhor the reasons for this low conviction rate but that doesn't mean that we should work for a high convictions rate. Those convicted of rape are most likely to be Third World and/or poor White men, as is true for convictions for nearly all other crimes. In order for a DA to "win" a rape case, he (or rarely, she) must use sexist, racist and classist stereotypes and assumptions, thereby supporting the worst aspects of the system. If the goal of this process is fighting and ending rape, it is bad and self defeating to use racist and classist means to get to that end. The process is crucial to the true success of the end.

The answer is not just to get rapists "off the street". Prisons themselves are incapable of changing rapists. Prison culture is much like that of the outside world, with all of the pressure intensified. Male sex roles, violence, and power relations which lead to rape in the first place, are strongly reinforced within prison. Rapists in prison don't stop raping--they simply enforce their power over men weaker than themselves. Prisons don't deal with the roots of the problem, they only add to the causes. Men getting out of prison have not learned new ways of relating to women and haven't developed an analysis of why they rape or how to change. It is likely that they will rape again.

In addition, the emphasis of many anti-rape groups on getting women to prosecute leads to a very narrow focus on a few specific rape situations. This ignores the totality of the problem. Most women experience varying degrees of violence in their everyday lives--from friends and lovers as well as from strangers. The answer to this situation is not to prosecute all cases (which is impossible and impractical as well as useless), but to work on creating more alternatives for people in their lives. This involves changing the institutions and culture which promote sexism, racism, and violence.

Those anti-rape groups who spend time working for reform legislation encounter many of the same problems and obstacles. Sexist attitudes (and actions) cannot be legislated away. Legislation does not exist in isolation; even "good" anti-rape legislation (and it isn't clear what that would be) will be ineffective in a sexist society that encourages violence against women, and in a criminal justice system that persecutes Third World and poor White men.

## centering ourselves

The time and energy that is now used to develop a good working relationship with the criminal justice system agencies, and on reform legislation, could be much better spent. Instead, the anti-rape movement should work on community education, and on developing practical alternatives that deal with both the systems and the roots of sexism and violence. We want our focus to be the creation of various community based and supported alternatives, because we think that the responsibility for dealing with rape should be in the hands of all community people. Some of the ideas and alternatives we're working on now include:

1. We encourage people to get together to discuss ways to watch out for each other. This includes block watching to make neighborhoods safe, organizing at workplaces to get support to deal with hassles from bosses and fellow workers, and organizing at schools to get self-defense classes, etc.
2. We try to create the consciousness in people that they should respond to a scream or a call for help, and that they should go to a woman's aid if it looks like she's being hassled.
3. We print the descriptions of men who rape, hassle and assault women so that rape will become a public issue, so that these men will lose their anonymity, and so women can be warned of some particular men.
4. Confrontations of rapists, etc. by women (or women and men). The message we want to present to men is that we know who they are and what they did, that they are responsible for their actions, and that they have the responsibility to change. We try to offer follow up re-education by anti-sexist men. Although we think that each individual confrontation is important, we hope that each one will have the more widespread effect of encouraging people to force men to stop violent and sexist behavior. This means that people have to deal with the men close to them--their family, friends, etc., as well as with strangers who hassle women.

Confrontations can be good for women who've been raped or hassled because they allow her to be active and powerful in a situation it is safe for her to be so. She can make the decisions about how a confrontation will take place and what she'd like to say. We can help her get together a group of women who will be supportive to her during this process. This is very different from reporting a rape to the police where the woman's role is a passive one (as a witness for the state) and where others make decisions about her case for her. (Contact us for more information about confrontations.)

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anti-rape (cont'd)



We realize that rape is not going to end by the creation of these few alternatives; that rape will only end with the development of a new system that provides a context for these changes in people's lives. We want to develop a movement that is working towards these changes. It is crucial for anti-rape groups not to focus as an isolated issue to the exclusion of developing a broader analysis of the society as a whole. We are impressed by what we know of the anti-rape movement in the People's Republic of China. From all evidence and reports, rape has ended or is exceedingly rare there. It was ended through a revolutionary process that changed the men, women, and the material conditions simultaneously. We strongly encourage everyone to read "Goldflower's Story" by Jack Belden, a pamphlet that deals with this process as it occurred in China<sup>3</sup>.

sweeping away the myths

Another concern of ours is the lack of the development of anti-racist politics and practice in the anti-rape movement. Historically, rape has been a tool used against Third World people. The sexist myth that women "ask for it", and lie about rape is applied many times more to all Third World women than it is to White women. Black women have been particularly subject to rape by White men from slavery on up to the present, for society has never given them any protection. In addition, rape was a primary weapon used against women in the genocidal campaign against Native Americans. The myth that most rapists are Black men has had enormous consequence for them. Thousands of Black men have been lynched or legally executed because they "looked at a White woman wrong." Of the 450 legal executions for rape, 408 of these men were Black. It is crucial that anti-rape groups fight the racist myths,

stereotypes, and institutions that are associated with rape. The first step in this process is to stop supporting the criminal justice system, because no matter what our intentions are, the system is racist through and through. Prisons are used to keep all Third World people down. We cannot turn our backs to the racism of the system when a Black man is being prosecuted, and expect that same racism not to be used against Joann Little, Yvonne Wanrow, Inez Garcia, etc. As we've said before, we must not support a racist process for any end. We must fight racism and sexism together.

centering ourselves

We see ourselves as a political group that offers educational services and tries to provide alternatives, not in an isolated context, but to broaden people's awareness of different forms of oppression, and the need to change the system. We call ourselves socialist feminists, and are working to build a strong revolutionary local movement with good politics about rape. We see the need for a strong national (and international) revolutionary movement that will provide the supportive context for our anti-rape work. We want to remain in close contact with the anti-rape movement. We want to be part of an anti-rape movement that can give support to, and build ties with other progressive movements. That is one reason we're writing this letter.

We hope that the ideas and issues raised in this letter will serve to spark discussion and debate within the anti-rape groups, and the left movement as a whole. We are very interested in any feedback anyone who reads this has. We are especially interested in making contact with those groups and individuals who are interested in exploring alternatives. Please write us at: Santa Cruz Women Against Rape, P.O. Box 711, Santa Cruz, California 95061, or call us at (408) 426-RAPE.

<sup>1</sup>We realize the following "history" of the anti-rape movement is rather simplistic, but we think that it is basically accurate. We know that there are many variations to these tendencies, and that there is conflict within groups over issues such as these. We have also had much less contact with the East Coast movement than we have had with the movement in California and the West Coast. Nevertheless we do feel that the issues we raise are real problems in the anti-rape movement and should be seriously addressed.

<sup>2</sup>Of course, every group is political. It is just as political to work within the system to maintain the status quo (as in the case of the service groups) as it is to work for change.

<sup>3</sup>"Goldflower's Story" by Jack Belden is a chapter of Belden's book *China Shakes the World*. It can also be obtained through the *New England Free Press*, 60 Union Square, Somerville, Mass. 02143. It costs 60¢, but we are sure bulk rates can be arranged.

by

robin mcduff, deanne pernell and karen saunders of Santa Cruz Women Against Rape



eleonora spalzer-roth

to explain that which should never have to be explained

Two quarters ago I took the men and sexism class with Joe Ferrandino and Warren Farrell's book, *The Liberated Man*. I ended the course with a position paper that renounced the whole idea of men's liberation, calling it, "the struggle for more struggle." Why? Because it in no way challenges the fact that for thousands of years, men have been and continue to be physically, emotionally and psychologically parasitic and predatory on women. It in no way challenges the fact that the male role is entirely predicated on the oppression of women. It in no way challenges the institutions that perpetrate, feed on, and exist because of women's oppression (e.g. church, capitalism, marriage, the state, education, etc.). In short, men's lib in no way deals with the real issue--women's oppression and how men oppress women. Rather, it focuses on a deliberately irrelevant issue--how the oppressor role "hurts" men. This is presently being used by the mass media to co-opt the women's movement. The extent to which men go to keep from dealing with their own sexism and hatred of women clearly illustrates how deeply and incredibly frightened they are.

Thus realizing how dangerous men's lib is to women's struggle, I felt compelled to attend the presentation by Farrel in the ballroom of USF on April 21 (1976). Following his hour and a half lecture, I initiated the question/answer period by asking him, "To what extent have you personally renounced the powers and privileges of the male role?" I wanted to know what he had done to stop oppressing women, and to end women's oppression. Rather than answering this question directly, he put it to the audience. Receiving no response, he prefaced his answer by saying, "I don't agree with your definition of power and privilege." Since I in no way defined these terms in my question, I realized immediately

that he knew precisely the importance and implication of what I was asking. He then presented an answer that deliberately and very slickly avoided the issue completely.

The clearest example I recall in his answer illustrates how subtly men assume power and privileges over women. "I give my wife her own space to be." This is the benevolent dictator who unquestioningly assumes his power to give and take a woman's being and existence, as he sees fit. He refers to a woman in the possessive--subtle indication of his assuming the privilege of owning her, which of course the oppressive marriage contract legally sanctions.



Following his answer and my realization of how he had slickly manipulated the audience into unconscious support of his subtle sexism, I left the room and joined a group of women to collectively demand him to relinquish his power so the women could exercise their right to speak. The remainder of the evening is Her-story, which I totally support.

After standing on women's necks for the past 5,000 years or so, the only honorable position we as men can take is one of total support of and commitment to women's struggle against the oppression we designed, and have been benefitting from ever since. This means renouncing the power that men can and do have over women, and the privileges of oppressing them. It means returning to women the right to define themselves, their oppression, and the struggle to end it. It means realizing that we as men are NOT oppressed, but rather have been protected from any real sense of oppression as women know it, completely at our expense. To do this requires a deep, total and ACTIVE commitment to fighting sexism within ourselves and in all of society. Men are either against women, or for them--there is no middle ground, no "gently" easing our way off their necks! The issue is black and white, and has been ever since men began positing themselves as superior, and using the powers and privileges to oppress women in every way conceivable. ENDING WOMEN'S OPPRESSION MEANS ENDING ALL OPPRESSION!

by

Karl W. Holz