

**PREVENTING SEXIST VIOLENCE:**  
**ARE WE DOING WHAT WE NEED TO BE DOING?**

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Good morning. Thanks so much for inviting me up here to participate in this, and a big thanks to Shawn Mincer who initially called me about this project. And what an exciting project it is!!! I am so thrilled and honored to be part of this.

Before I begin, I want to be clear about what I mean by prevention and what I am encouraging us to prevent. Prevention, to me, means stopping something before it happens. In this case, prevention means stopping sexist violence before it is done. I'm talking this morning about sexist violence by which I mean: sexual assault and domestic violence, as well as pornography, prostitution, trafficking, and stalking. All of these forms of violence and abuse are inter-related and part of prevention, if we are going to be successful at all, means taking action to prevent all of them. I'm going to begin by talking about prevention efforts as one aspect of educational efforts, then I'll speak to how I see prevention as education, and education as a whole, as fitting into community organizing and community development. Because I am going to address these two broad items, what I am going to offer is an overview rather than a description.

Prevention as Education

Education has three inter-related aspects. Most of the time, however, these three distinct although related aspects are not conceived of as separate and as such, education efforts addressing sexist violence tend to be some hodgepodge of all three without doing any particularly well. The three aspects of education are:

- ▶ Awareness – includes professional training
- ▶ Avoidance – includes self-defense
- ▶ Prevention

For the purposes of this conversation, I'm going to focus on the prevention aspect of education, but before I do, a couple of quick comments about education as a whole. If educational efforts are to be effective, each of these aspects needs to be understood and developed on its own, as does the inter-relationship of these three aspects. A comprehensive education effort requires a strategic plan involving a variety of educational programs to reach different goals and objectives. Each presentation has its own goals and purposes as well as its specific audience(s). An effective educational program requires strategically planning each specific activity, and how it fits into the broader community-wide goals. If we really want to change attitudes, then we need to begin demanding more than 50-minute presentations in the local schools. If we spend hundreds of millions of dollars and 2+ years getting you to make an opinion between tweedle dee

and tweedle dum for president, the certainly we can spend more than an hour and some chump change to change people's attitudes about sexism and sexist violence.

In educating about sexist violence, there are different reasons to talk to men and women. There are benefits to sex specific educational opportunities as well as coed (although there appear to be many more benefits to men of coed groups than for women). Research suggests that doing a one-time educational program for women demonstrates some long-term benefit. Women report retaining the information they learn at a program for at least several weeks after a presentation, and indicate that they are more willing to and know better how to respond if and when a friend is assaulted (i.e., support her, call the police, contact the local rape crisis center, etc.). For men, the data is much less promising. In fact, research suggests that one-time programs do more harm than good – several weeks after an educational program, men show less empathy for rape victims, more support for rape myths, and less support for feminism than before a presentation. This suggests, obviously, that if our goals for educating men include changing men's attitudes, we need to do more than one time programs, and design something more akin to educational campaigns.

One last note about education in general. Language is very important and the way we frame these issues is crucial. As Andrea Dworkin reminds us, sexist violence doesn't just happen, it is done. When we talk about "violence against women" we suggest that it happens – because in that construction of sexist violence, no one is responsible. This becomes even more glaring with the specifics that tend to be used – 1 in 4 women are raped, 1 in 3 women are battered, 1 in 7 men are sexually victimized... In each of these constructions, no one is responsible. Note the difference between "1 in 4 women are raped", and "1 in 4 women are raped by men." All of a sudden, rape becomes something done, and there is someone responsible. This distinction may seem small, but it is crucial!

I mentioned earlier that there are three aspects of education: awareness, avoidance and prevention. Each set of activities has different general audiences. For my purposes here, I am going to focus on prevention.

In the public health literature, there are three kinds of prevention: primary (which means stopping it before it occurs), secondary (which means addressing those who are at high risk), and tertiary (working with those who have already done it to keep them from doing it again) (McMahon, 2000). From the public health model, "preventing" any kind of issue requires efforts that address all three kinds of prevention.

Primary prevention education against sexist violence focuses on those who commit and those who benefit from the violence. To make a parallel with racial and homophobic violence – we don't prevent gay bashing by educating the LGBT communities; we don't prevent police brutality or racist violence by educating people or communities of color. If we want to prevent gay bashing, we educate heterosexuals. If we want to prevent police brutality and other forms of racist violence, we educate European Americans. The same is true with sexist violence. Sexual assault and domestic violence are gendered crimes. As such, prevention focuses on men as the group that perpetrates and benefits from the violence. Understanding sexist violence as gendered does not mean that we discount that sometime (rarely) women perpetrate these crimes – no more

than we would discount that sometime gay people beat up heterosexuals, or that people of color attack European Americans. Understanding sexual assault and domestic violence as gendered crimes is to look at the aggregate data and understand that overwhelmingly, these are crimes perpetrated by men that target women.

Educating men to prevent sexist violence begins by redefining sexist violence as a men's issue. It is not a women's issue, and I would argue, isn't a human issue (though it is best understood as a feminist issue). The fact that one in three women (conservatively speaking) are victimized by men says much more about masculinity and manhood than it ever said about femininity and women-ness. Defining sexist violence a men's issue includes:

- ▶ Men are also victimized (mostly by other men)
- ▶ Men know and love women and men who are victimized
- ▶ Men perpetrate the violence
- ▶ Men know the men who perpetrate sexist violence – If most women know closely the men who perpetrate the abuse against them, and we know women who are victimized, then it follows that we likely know the men who are hurting the women in our lives.
- ▶ Men are seen as a threat by women – We can either get mad at her for “accusing us,” ignore it, or get mad at sexism and at the societal structures that set it up so that in order to be safe she has to see me as a threat.
- ▶ Being free from sexist violence is a basic human right – If other human rights issues are enough of a men's issue for men to be involved, then sexist violence – as a human rights issue, demands men's involvement!!!

As a men's issue, it becomes more pressing that men act.

After re-defining sexist violence as a men's issue, the next steps are to educate men about how to get involved, overcoming barriers to men's involvement, describe the history and successes of men's involvement and work, and make some personal commitments. One of the main difficulties in men's anti-sexist work is that it requires efforts on both personal and political levels. It is not enough for men to only work on their own sexism – for if we do, then we leave the sexist and abusive structures in place that result in men continuing to victimize women. If all we do is political/community work, then we are likely to ignore our own sexism and abusive attitudes/behaviors.

I have lots and lots more that I could say about men's work, but due to time constraints I'm going to switch gears to talk about prevention as organizing. I will make one final point about working with men – that is that of all the programs that have been developed and are offered (The Men's Program, bystander efforts, Men of Strength Clubs, the White Ribbon Campaign, Men's pledges, men's peer education projects, men's self-help groups, organizing men's activist groups, etc...) nothing works (if works means seeing a reduction in the incidence of sexual assaults or domestic violence). To me, this means we need to do everything – a little of this, a little of that, a pinch of the other and a whole heaping of something else altogether.

## Prevention as Education as part of Prevention as Organizing

In terms of preventing sexist violence, educational efforts are but one set of the many tools available in a tool-box of skills and efforts to re-build our communities to be free of sexist violence. There are a whole host of other tools that we need to know about and become adept at using if our goal is to prevent sexist violence. The tool-box holding all of these tools, is community organizing. My focus on community organizing comes from my understanding of anti-sexist violence work. When I began this work in 1983, it was seen as a movement with a social change focus. Our work is not only about responding to the individual women and men who have been victimized by men, but also about changing society so that men don't victimize anymore. From the feminist understanding, sexist violence occurs within a broader context in which women are systematically undervalued, and men are systematically overvalued (Connell and Wilson, 1974, Kendrick, 1998, Schechter, S., 1982). Sexist violence occurs because individual people choose to act abusively within this socio-political-cultural context which grants them permission or license to act in those ways. Prevention, then, means addressing the individual acts of violence and abuse, while simultaneously working to change society so that women are not seen as appropriate targets for men's sexism and abuse. Ultimately, preventing sexist violence means radical social change. Community organizing is one of the most effective means to achieve social change.

As Renk et al (2002) describes in relation to child sexual abuse (based on Bronfenbrenner, 1977), there are several layers of prevention efforts:

### Micro Level

- ▶ Empower women and reduce their risk of being victimized.
- ▶ Empower men and reduce their threat of abusing.

### Meso Level

- ▶ Family and friends
  - How to empower women and support the women and men in their lives when they are victimized and/or who are abusive
  - How to empower men and hold men accountable to a non-sexist masculinity.

### Exo Level

- ▶ The immediate community – neighborhoods, schools, campuses, businesses, etc.
  - Offering culturally appropriate resources (classes, workshop, etc.) that empower women.
  - Offering culturally appropriate resources (classes, workshop, groups, etc.) for men on how to challenge sexism, end sexist violence and be allies for women.

### Macro Level

- ▶ Socio-cultural contexts in which abuse occurs. This includes the broader hegemonic culture, as well as the subculture of the persons directly involved.
  - New images of femininity and masculinity – or doing away with these concepts altogether.

Preventing sexist violence means organizing at all of these levels strategically and comprehensively.

One example of community organizing on the exo-level around issues of sexist violence is the recent development of collaborative community responses. Community organizing certainly includes working to identify and coordinate the services that exist on the local level to address sexist violence. But it can also include much more – and to prevent sexist violence, needs to. Community organizing generally assumes working with community members and frequently the dispossessed members of communities, to develop locally based, sound solutions that are feasible to the members of the communities that are most effected (Kahn, 1995, Naples, 1998, Salomon, 1998). This is particularly true when organizing around sexist violence (Bhattacharjee, Funk, 1993, Kendrick, 1998). Thus prevention efforts need to refocus on organizing all of the community not just agencies – mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts, nephews, neighborhood “god mothers,” coaches, barbers and beauticians, ministers and rabbis, and any and everyone else who is important in and to our communities. These are the folks that are most effected by sexist violence, who have most at stake, and who can be the most invested in working towards prevention.

One of the growing trends in community organizing/community development, begun internationally (mostly in poorer communities in nations of the 2/3rds world), is “social capital” (Gitell and Vidal, 1998). The basic notion of social capital is that communities are not built on mortar, concrete, steel and economic capital, but are rather built on social capital – compassion, concern and care. That is, it is the social relationships, emotional well being, human resource and social services (formal and informal) that create cohesion and connection and it is this cohesion and connection that is the essence of community. Rarely in the discussions of social capital do the issues of sexist violence come up. But as leaders in this movement, let’s take a moment to consider what the social capital aspects of community include. What would it look like if our communities were built on the foundation of women’s and children’s safety, well-being, and empowerment? How would our streets be designed if first in our minds was the impact on the safety of women and children? What kinds and range of responses would be in place to hold (the emphasis being on **holding**) men who batter and men who sexually offend accountable for their action? How do we identify them earlier and encourage them to identify themselves? How do we keep them as members of our communities?

Another set of tools in our prevention tool-box focuses more on the macro levels – these are the tools related to protests and demonstrations, up to and including civil disobedience. Take Back the Night came from the feminist movement for social change, and began as a protest action. There were times when we took to the streets to protest – with or without permits. There was a time when we used civil disobedience in order to make our voices heard when we got tired of being ignored. As we have grown and developed as a movement, and in part as we have become more professionalized, we seem to have lost some of that willingness to “take the streets.” I submit that there is still room and a need for those kinds of actions, demonstrations, protests and yup, even civil disobedience. There are still times when our voices are ignored and when we need to be willing to get rude to get heard. How can it be that in 2002 we had a major election in which sexist violence are not electoral issues? How can *any* politician get away without having a public position on ending domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking?!? It’s up to us to

make enough noise for them to know they better take a position, and then to follow through!  
And this is part of prevention – this is part of community organizing!

On the grassroots level we have seen an increase over the past dozen or so years, of what has become known as multi-issues organizing (for example, the demonstrations and protests related to the world trade organization, the world bank and the International Monetary Fund). This kind of organizing is more complicated, difficult and challenging, but it can also lead to more successful outcomes. As Suzanne Pharr suggests, if we want our solutions to be successful, then they need to be as complicated, convoluted and complex as the problems we seek to solve. Multi-issues organizing involves identifying how many different issues converge at one problems or target, and creating means to address the multiplicity of issues with one campaign. For example, issues of police brutality, the death penalty, unequal access to voting and sexist violence...

### Implications for Tertiary Prevention – Addressing Men who Batter or Who Sexually Offend...

As I suggested earlier, doing community organizing for prevention has some profound implications for the work with men who batter and men who sexually offend. I don't know how things are done in Michigan, but in most parts of the country, the work with "victim/survivors" and work with "offenders" is seen as separate and apart. It seems to me that those of us who identify as victim/survivor advocates and activists need to see the work that is being done with men who have perpetrated violence as part of our broad efforts towards prevention of sexist violence. This is tertiary prevention – working with men who have already been violent to not be violent again, but it is still prevention. It is prevention, firstly, because the folks who work with men who offend need to be accountable to us and to the people we are working with and on behalf of. It is prevention work because it is part of the same work – granted from different angles, and in order to be truly effective, all of the prevention efforts need to be brought under the same umbrella and offered in a comprehensive and strategic manner. As we consider organizing to end sexist violence, a part of those efforts needs to include a comprehensive tertiary prevention effort that identifies boys and men who offend and provides resources and services to assist them to keep from re-offending – including post-conviction, pre-sentencing offender assessment; community-based programs; post-prison services; and informal efforts.<sup>i</sup>

There is much more to community organizing as preventing sexist violence. In order for our movement to continue to grow and continue, we need to re-examine some of the lessons of our past and look at some of the other lessons that are being developed in other movements for social justice, and incorporate what we see into our efforts.

### A Vision of a Comprehensive Prevention Effort

Let me offer a brief overview of what I envision as a comprehensive prevention effort.

Firstly, I see a prevention effort as including a comprehensive, strategic educational program. This includes awareness, avoidance and prevention efforts – targeted awareness and avoidance for girls and women (including women-centered self-defense training); awareness, avoidance; and prevention for boys and men, awareness for girls and boys, and men and women;

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professional training projects; public awareness campaigns (including media campaigns) and the use of the arts.

Secondly, a comprehensive prevention effort would involve a variety of activities designed to organize and mobilize men to be allies for women. This would include developing group like the Men of Strength Clubs developed by Men Can Stop Rape Inc. – groups of young men addressing issues of masculinity and men’s relationships with women. These groups would be offered to parallel with groups like “Women of Power.” In addition, partnerships would be developed with the boy scouts for them to offer merit badges for child care, raising money for the local battered women’s shelter and anti-rape education. Further efforts would involve organizing men to organize fundraising events for local programs – it is because of men’s behavior that we need rape crisis and battered women’s programs, it should be up to men to ensure they are adequately funded. Let’s find ways to use the Super Bowl, the Final Four, the Daytona 500 and the Masters as fundraising opportunities for local programs. Yet another men’s group would be organized to do education with men and actions. For example, developing similar efforts to what I helped the University of Alabama men’s group organize a couple of years ago – a Give Back the Night action to coincide with Take Back the Night where men symbolically stay indoors. During this action, men can provide child care for women who want to attend Take Back the Night, organize fundraising events, and do educational programs.

A third aspect of a comprehensive prevention effort would include monitoring judges, prosecuting and defense attorneys, sheriffs and politicians. Holding them accountable for their actions, decision and the way they treat women who have been victimized.

A fourth aspect nonviolence training and coalition building with other civil rights, human rights and social justice movements that are available in the locale. This would not only broaden and strengthen the agenda, but would also lay the foundation for demonstrations and actions when they become necessary.

I could go on, but time constraints limit my visioning at the moment...

The goal of this comprehensive strategic prevention plan is to establish a community-wide norm that pushes the envelope of what it means for men to respect women.

### Conclusion

In closing, let me use one of my most favorite quotes of all time that seems particularly relevant to this conversation. James Baldwin said, “the most radical step you can take, is your next one.” I have been talking for the past several minutes about, in effect, being proudly radical and reclaiming our radical edge. Visioning communities that are free of sexist violence is radical visioning – and getting to there is a radical departure from here. I’m not sure what your next, most radical step is, but I hope that you take it, rest assured I’ll be taking mine, and that we figure out a way to take our next most radical steps in concert towards that world that we all want, that we all deserve.

Thank-you!

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## **END NOTES**

<sup>i</sup> One example of this kind of efforts is Stop it Now! Originally in Vermont but recently opening in Ireland and Philadelphia. Stop it Now! focuses on child sexual abuse, but I think there are profound implications for the prevention work with all forms of sexist violence. There are 2 main aspects to Stop it Now! The first is to shift the focus of protecting kids. It is not the responsibility of children to protect themselves – it is our obligation as adults to protect children. As crucial as the efforts are to educate children about “good touch bad touch,” when that is all of our efforts around child sexual abuse, we send the message that it is kid’s responsibility to protect themselves. So Stop it NOW! developed a mass media and public awareness campaign designed to talk to adults about how to watch out for kids more effectively, and what to do when they see something inappropriate or abusive.