

Activist scenes are no safe space for women

On abuse of activist women by activist men

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2005

As a woman who has experienced physical and emotional abuse from men, some of whom I had long relationships with, it is always difficult to learn from other activist women that they are being abused by activist men.

The interrelated issues of sexism, misogyny and homophobia in activist circles is rampant, so it is unsurprising that women are abused physically and emotionally by activist men with whom they work with on various projects.

I am not speaking abstractedly here. Indeed, I know of various relationships between activist men and women in which the latter is being abused if not physically, emotionally. For example, a long time ago a friend of mine showed me bruises on her arm that she told me were from another male activist. This woman certainly struggles emotionally, which is somewhat expected given that she has experienced physical abuse. What was additionally heartbreaking to see is how the woman was shunned by activist circles when she tried to talk about her abuse or have it addressed. Some told her to get over it, or to focus on “real” male assholes such as prominent political figures. Others told her to not let her “personal problems” get in the way of “doing the work.”

I struggled with my friend’s recovery too. As a survivor of abuse, it was difficult to meet a woman who in some ways was a ghost of me. I would run into this woman, and she would randomly tell me about another fight that she and her boyfriend had gotten into. I would find myself avoiding this woman because frankly, it was hard to look at a woman who reminded me too much of who I was not too long ago: a scared, embarrassed and desperate person who would babble to anyone willing to listen about what was happening to her. In other words, I, like this woman, had gone through the desperation of trying to get out of an abusive relationship and needing to finally tell people what was happening to me. And similar to how this woman was treated, most people, even those I called friends, shied away from listening to me because they did not want to be bothered or were struggling with their own emotional struggles.

The embarrassment associated with telling people that you have been abused, and like myself, stayed in an abusive relationship, is made even worse by the responses you get from people. Rather than be sympathetic, many people were disappointed in me. Many times I was told by people that they were “surprised” to find out that I had “put up with that shit” because unlike “weak women,” I was a “strong” and “political” woman. This response is downright misogynist

because it denies how dominant patriarchy and hatred of women and the “feminine” is, and instead tries to place the blame on women. That is, we are to ignore that women are being abused by men and instead emphasize the character of women as the definitive reason for why some are abused and others don’t “put up with that shit.”

I can’t help but think that other activist women who have been abused, whether by activist men or not, also face similar difficulties recovering from abuse. Regardless of one’s politics, women can be and do get abused. Anyone who refuses to believe this either just doesn’t listen to women or think about what women go through on the regular. And this is because they are just hostile to recognizing how pervasive and normalized patriarchy and misogyny are—both outside of and within activist circles.

More, a lot of us want to believe that activist men really are different from our fathers, brothers, old boyfriends, and male strangers we confront in our daily routines. We want to have some faith that the guy who writes a position paper on sexism and posts it on his website is not writing it just to make himself look good, get pussy, or cover up some of his dangerous practices towards women. We want to believe that women are being respected for their skills, energy and political commitment and are not being asked to do work because they are viewed as “exploitable” and “abuse-able” by activist men. We want to believe that if an activist male made an unwarranted advance or physically/sexually assaulted an activist woman that it would promptly and thoughtfully be dealt with by organizations and political communities—and with the input of the victim. We want to think that activist groups are not so easily enticed by the skills or “name-power” that an activist male brings to a project that they are willing to let a woman be abused or have her recovery go unaddressed in exchange. And we would like to think that “security culture” in activist circles does not only focus on issues of listserv protocol or using fake names at rallies but actually includes thinking proactively about how to deal with misogyny, patriarchy and heterosexism both outside of and within the activist scenes.

But all of these wishes, all of these dreams obviously tend to go unaddressed. Instead, I know of activist men who troll political spaces like predators looking for women that they can politically manipulate or fuck without accountability. Like abusive priests, some of these men literally move from city to city looking to recreate themselves and find fresh meat among those who are unfamiliar with their reputation. And I have seen activist women give their labor and skills to activist men (who often take the credit) in hopes that the abusive activist man will finally get his act right or appreciate her as a human being.

While romance between activists is fine, I think it is disgusting how activist men use romance to control women politically and keep women emotionally committed to helping the man out politically, even when his politics are corny or problematic. Or, in some cases, activist men get involved in politics to find women they can involve in abusive relationships and control. And given that abuse brings out the worst in the victim, I have seen where women interact with other activists (particularly women) in ways they might not normally if they were not being politically and emotionally manipulated by men. For example, I know of abused activist females who have spread rumors about other activist women or have gotten involved in political battles between her boyfriend and other activists.

What’s scary is that I know activist men who were abusing and manipulating female activist and at the same time, writing position papers on sexism and competition between women. Sometimes the activist male will pen the position paper with his activist girlfriend in order to gain more legitimacy. I know of activist men who quote bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, or other feminist writ-

ers one minute and are harassing or spreading lies and gossip about their activist girlfriend the next. And activist men will school activist women on how to be less competitive with other women to conceal their abusive and manipulative behavior.

What is more heartbreaking is the level of support abusive activist men find from other activists, male and female but most usually other men. Not only do activist women have to confront and negotiate their abuser in activist circles, they must usually do so in a political community that talks a good game but in the end could give a shit about the victims' emotional and physical safety. On many occasions I have listened to women's stories of abuse be retold and recast by activist men in a hostile and sexist manner. And when they recast this story, they often do in that voice, the voice that is snide, accusatory and mocking.

For example, when I was sharing with an activist male my concerns about how an activist female was being treated by an activist male who held a prominent position in a political group, the man "listening" to my story said in that voice, "Oh, she's probably just mad 'cause he started dating someone else" and went on to make fun of her. He continued to tell me that while he "acknowledges" the man is wrong, the woman needs to stand up to the man if she wants the treatment to stop. Unfortunately this man's brand of misogyny disguised as male feminism is all too common in activist circles given that a lot of men in general believe that women are abused because they are weak or secretly want to be in relationships with abusive men. More, his comments revealed an attitude that assumes that if activist women take issue with activist men, they are "crying abuse" to cover up hidden sexual desires and anger over being rejected by men who "won't fuck them."

I find it disgusting that women's physical and emotional safety is of little concern to activist men in general. While activist men will pay some lip service to how they need to keep their mouths shut when women are talking or how women only spaces are necessary, all too often "critical" and "political" people do not want to confront the fact that women are being abused by male activists in our circles. When the issue is "addressed," more often than not attention will be given to "struggling with" the man (i.e., letting him stay and maybe just gossiping about him). I have even seen some situations where abusive men become adopted, so to speak, by other activists, who see rehabilitating the man as part of their project and think little about what this means for the women who are trying to recover. In some cases, the male activist abuser was adopted while the woman was shunned as "unstable," "crazy" or "too emotional." Basically, these groups would rather help a cold, calculating guy who can "keep it together" while he abuses women rather than deal with the reality that abuse can contribute to emotional and social difficulties among victims as they work to become survivors.

And in some cases, activist women will avoid going to the police because she is critical of the prison industrial complex but also because other activist men will tell her she is "contributing to the problem" by "bringing the state in." But in most cases, the activist male is not chastised for the problems he has created. Thus, women are stuck having to figure out how to insure her safety without being labeled a "sell-out" by her activist peers.

While I am a strong believer that we need to try to work towards healing rather than punishment per se, I am painfully aware that we often put more emphasis on helping men stay in activist circles than supporting women through their recoveries, which might involve the need to have the man purged from the political group. Basically, the group will usually determine that the activist abuser must be allowed to heal without asking the woman what she needs from the group to heal and be supported in her process. I know of many examples of where women are

forced to put up with the groups' unwillingness to address abuse. Some will remain involved in organizations because they believe in the work and frankly, there are few spaces to go, if any, where she is not at risk of being abused by another activist or have her abuse unaddressed. Others will simply leave the organization. I have seen how these women get treated by other activists—men and women—who treat women coldly or gossip that they are selfish or sell-outs for letting the personal get in way of “the work.”

Or, if activist women who have been abused are “supported,” it is usually because she does “good work” or that not addressing the abuse will be “bad for the group.” In this sense, the physical, emotional and spiritual health of women is still sacrificed. Instead, the woman’s abuse must be addressed because if it is not, she might not continue doing “good work” for the organization or there might be too much tension in the group for it to run efficiently. Either way, women’s safety is not viewed as worthy of concern in and of itself.

Overall, activist scenes are no safe space for women because misogynists and abusive men exist within them. More, many of these abusers use the language, tools of activism and support by other activists as means to abuse women and conceal their behavior. And unfortunately, in a lot of political circles, regardless of how much we talk about patriarchy or misogyny, women are sacrificed in order to keep up “the work” or save the organization. Perhaps it is time we actually just care that activist women are vulnerable to being manipulated and abused by activist males and consider that proactively addressing this is an integral part of the “work” that activists must do.

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Retrieved on May 13, 2019 from
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