



**“It’s not the abuse that kills you, it’s the silence”:  
The Silencing of Sexual Violence Activism in Social Justice Movements in the UK Left.**

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## **“It’s not the abuse that kills you, it’s the silence”: The Silencing of Sexual Violence Activism in Social Justice Movements in the UK Left.**

Julia Downes<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*Widespread doubt and disbelief of women and non-binary survivors who disclose, speak out and demand accountability for the violence they have experienced within social justice movements in the UK Left reveals a painful impasse and persistent barrier in movement building. Systemic failures of criminal justice responses to rape, sexual assault and domestic violence, coupled with State violence and regulation of social justice movements and marginalised groups, has led to consideration of community alternatives to help transform activist communities into cultures of safety and accountability. However, ‘counter-organising’ (INCITE! 2003; 2006) can distort, scrutinise and dismantle the work of survivors and their supporters in developing community accountability and safer spaces processes. The salvage research project (Downes, Hanson and Hudson, 2016) used participatory action research approaches and qualitative interviews with 10 women and non-binary survivors to explore the lived experiences of harm, violence and abuse experienced in activist communities in the UK. This article will explore how resistance to disclosures of gendered violence and anti-violence activism can be as (or more) harmful than the violence initially experienced. Five key silencing strategies are explored: (i) discrediting survivors and supporters; (ii) questioning the legitimacy of claim; (iii) questioning the legitimacy of community accountability; (iv)*

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*avoiding troubling recognitions; and (v) placing burden on survivors. The silencing of survivors and their supporters permits unequal power relations to remain unchanged, and removes any need for the misogyny and sexism produced in activist communities to be critically examined.*

## **Introduction**

Previous scholarship has highlighted how ‘carceral logics’ exacerbate the poverty and violence experienced by people of colour, queer and transgender communities, working class and sex radical communities (Crenshaw, 1991; Sudbury, 2005; Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock, 2011; Spade, 2011; Stanley and Smith, 2011; Price, 2012; Lambie, 2013; 2015; Patterson, 2016). For those located in critical criminology and social movements on the Left (typically white dominated spaces) an emphasis on the State as ‘the powerful’ can lead to a tendency to locate the source of oppression outside immediate circles. This can obscure inequalities (of race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, age and disability) and conceal silencing strategies at work from inside social justice movements and disciplinary communities. For instance, performances of ‘militant masculinities’ within anti-globalisation social movements and ‘manarchists’ in anarchist groups routinely exclude and marginalise women, transgender and non-binary individuals (Coleman and Bassi, 2011; Filar, 2016). Dominant constructions of whiteness in feminist activism and scholarship erase and exclude black feminists (Carby, 1982; Amos and Parmer, 1984; Jonsson, 2016).

Social processes that compound harm and exclude the most vulnerable in our societies act as obstacles to movement building that undermine core values of equality, liberation and freedom. As INCITE! national committee member Emi Kane explained “the transformative potential of a movement is only as present as the strength or voice of the most marginalised” (cited in Bhattacharjya, et al, 2013: 287). In addition, as Courtney Desiree Morris and Theresa Warburton have highlighted, gender power relations and heterosexual intimacies are a critical weakness that can be used by agents of State repression to infiltrate social justice movements (Morris, 2010; Warburton, 2016). This is evident in the Police Spies Out of Lives<sup>2</sup> campaign for women activists deceived into long-term intimate relationships with undercover police officers who infiltrated UK

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<sup>2</sup> For further information on Police Spies Out of Lives:  
<https://policespiesoutoflives.org.uk> (Accessed 7 March 2017)

environmental and social justice groups (also see Lubbers, 2012; Jones, 2013). Social justice movements in the UK Left are faced with the task of examining and dismantling structural power relations that limit, threaten and undermine movement building.

In recent years, responses to allegations of rape, sexual assault and domestic violence made against white male activist leaders, such as Julian Assange of WikiLeaks and 'Comrade Delta' of the Socialist Workers Party, have been criticised. Public debate and discussion has highlighted ongoing misogyny and sexism in social justice movements. This presence of, and difficulty in dealing with, gendered violence within social justice communities can be experienced as a painful impasse for activists. Unsatisfied by the internal responses of social justice organisations (such as dispute committees and complaints procedures) and the criminal justice system, survivors and their supporters within the Left have been exploring alternative strategies (such as safer space policies and community accountability processes) to hold abusers accountable for their behaviour and make social justice movements safer for survivors. However widespread support for, and implementation of, these alternative strategies has proved difficult to realise in practice. Positioned as diversity workers within social justice organisations and movements, sexual violence activists encounter many 'brick walls' (Ahmed, 2017). With so much at stake, how can the labour and demands of sexual violence activists within social justice communities be resisted? How can demands for safety and accountability be dismantled and silence restored? What is the impact of silencing upon survivors? What mechanisms of power does silencing reveal within social justice communities?

In this article, I focus on some of the main silencing strategies at work within white-dominated anti-authoritarian social justice communities; meaning organisations, spaces and campaigns that fall under the umbrella of the UK Left. This includes groups who may identify as socialist, communist, anarchist, pro-feminist, anti-fascist, anti-imperialist and/or anti-capitalist. I start with an overview of three public cases that have been crucial in framing contemporary discussions of gendered violence within the UK Left: Julian Assange, 'Comrade Delta' and Steve Hedley. This is followed by a critical examination of the landscape of criminal justice and State responses to sexual violence that underpins an exploration of community alternatives to address gendered violence in social justice movements. Then drawing on empirical data with sexual violence survivors and supporters gathered in the salvage research project alongside public commentary of high-profile cases of gendered violence; I explore how accountability is evaded and unequal power relations maintained

through a set of silencing strategies that: (i) discredit survivors and supporters; (ii) question the legitimacy of claims; (iii) question the legitimacy of community accountability; (iv) avoid troubling recognitions; and (v) place the burden on survivors. In viewing the impasse of sexual violence in social justice movements from the perspectives of survivors, I question how and why the status quo is prioritised over the lives of sexual violence survivors harmed within these movements. Where is the line between valuable critique and setting up processes to fail, and crucially, who decides?

### **Going public: Survivors speak out in the Left**

Three influential cases of violence against women within the Left have informed the wider contexts in which survivors and their supporters are attempting to build cultures of safety and accountability. The most prominent involves Julian Assange. Julian Assange is best known as the founder of WikiLeaks, an organisation and website that publishes secret information, news leaks and classified information from anonymous news sources and whistle-blowers. On 6 December 2010, shortly after releasing information regarding the US-led 'war on terror', Julian Assange was accused of committing rape and sexual assault against two women, known as Miss A and Miss W, by a Swedish public prosecutor (Davies, 2010). This has resulted in a prolonged legal battle as Assange has resisted extradition and in June 2012 was granted asylum on humanitarian grounds at the Ecuadorean Embassy in London. During 2015 two charges against Assange expired but the investigation of the rape charge remained ongoing (Crouch, 2015). However, on 19 May 2017 Sweden's director of public prosecutions, Marianne Ny, dropped the preliminary investigation into the rape charge against Assange stating that "all possibilities to conduct the investigation are exhausted" (Addley and Travis, 2017). The investigation could still be re-opened if Assange returns to Sweden before the statute of limitations runs out in 2020. However, at the time of writing Assange has arguably managed to exhaust investigation into the allegations of sexual violence made against him and continues to reside in the Ecuadorean embassy evading arrest for breaching his bail conditions.

Elsewhere in the UK 'Comrade Delta' (Martin Smith, the former National Secretary and member of the Central Committee in the Socialist Workers Party, or SWP), faced allegations of serious sexual assault by two women, Comrade W and Comrade X, in 2012. The case was subjected to an internal investigation by the SWP Dispute Committee. This investigation was sensationalised in right-

wing press as a “sharia-style court” (Edwards, 2013) and “kangaroo court” (Bracchi, 2013). The inability of the SWP to effectively acknowledge and respond to sexual violence within its organisation led many long-term activists, including Ian Birchall and Richard Seymour, to leave the party (Platt, 2014). The third case involved a complaint of domestic violence made against Steve Hedley, the Assistant General Secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) and (now former) member of the Socialist Party, by his former partner Caroline Leneghan, a Socialist Party member and assistant Branch secretary. The RMT carried out an internal investigation and no action was taken. Leneghan (2013) posted a public statement with images to speak out about domestic violence she experienced from Steve Hedley on International Women’s Day.

In accordance with the observation that male academic reputations tend to withstand sexual harassment charges (Whitley and Page, 2015), it can be argued that the reputations of high-profile male activists are equally robust. Although Hedley resigned from the Socialist Party (Socialist Party, 2013) some have noted that the party have maintained a positive and close working relationship with him and that Hedley is still idolised as a prominent ‘left wing’ trade unionist. In some cases, men accused of gendered violence have gained power and wider recognition. For instance, ‘Comrade Delta’ was subsequently given a PhD place at Liverpool Hope University. Meanwhile, Assange won UN recognition that he has been subjected to ‘arbitrary detention’ by Swedish and UK governments (Addley, Bowcott, Elgot, Farrell and Crouch, 2016).

In these cases, the structural power and privilege of the accused, in terms of race, class and gender, can be wielded to legitimise the accounts of the accused. As Judith Herman explained “the more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more his arguments prevail” (Herman, 1992: 8). The survivors in these cases used criminal justice responses, internal dispute and complaint procedures and public statements on the Internet in their attempts to seek accountability. However, abusers could still effectively evade accountability and silence survivors in each arena. We will return to consider these cases in more depth in the discussion of silencing sexual violence activism alongside the perspectives of survivors who participated in the salvage research project. It is, however, important to acknowledge struggles to secure resources for survivors of gendered violence to access specialist support and seek justice and accountability, including criminal legal responses and third sector support services, which involves difficult negotiations with state interests and neo-liberal ideologies.

### **Tensions in criminal justice and advocacy work with survivors**

Feminists, practitioners and researchers in the violence against women and girls (VAWG) field are aware of the uneasy entanglements of feminist politics with the State in doing advocacy and justice work for and with survivors of gendered violence (Southall Black Sisters Collective, 1990; Peterson 1999; Jones 2004, Gupta 2003; Wilcox 2006; Price 2012; Patterson 2016). Critics within the field have argued that the domestic violence revolution has ‘stalled’ (Stark, 2007) and that there is a need to “redraw the map of violence against women” (Price, 2012: 1). Multiple failures have been identified in criminal justice responses to rape and sexual assault including: widespread under-reporting; poor professional practices; ‘no-criming’; and attrition of cases and low conviction rates (McMillan, 2013; 2016; McMillan and White, 2015). Some criminal justice responses and policing practices that aim to reduce violence against women, such as mandatory arrest for incidents of domestic violence, have been found to increase women’s criminalisation (Chesney-Lind, 2006). Domestic violence has been found to be a key pathway for working class black women to prison (Richie, 1996). This means that criminal justice responses can exacerbate harms to the victims it sets out to ‘protect’ and ‘make safe’. This can leave survivors caught up in a criminal justice system that fails to challenge the enduring realities of living with violence in a racist and sexist society. Whilst some compassionate critics view such outcomes as ‘unintended consequences’ that can be smoothed out with further reform. More radical critiques see the State as responsible for perpetrating violence, particularly against working class queer, trans and non-binary communities of colour, by seeking to expand the capitalist interests of the prison industrial complex under the guise of security, law and order (Davis, 2003; Mogul, et al, 2011; Spade, 2011; Stanley and Smith, 2011; Richie, 2012; Lamble, 2013; Patterson, 2016).

Related to this is the concept of an anti-violence “non-profit industrial complex” (INCITE! 2017 [2007]; Patterson 2016) as an arm of the state. This refers to an increasing displacement of grassroots politics and activist practices with trained experts and qualified professionals who deliver specialist support services for victims. This non-profit industry is said to enable “the state not to directly deal with the problems of violence, but simply to manage violence in multiple spaces” (Peterson, 1999: 65; see also Stark 2007: 74-79). Reliance upon the State for core funding can leave specialist support services vulnerable to insecure provision and closure, the need to conform to erratic regimes of

monitoring targets and outcomes, and increased competition with other service providers, particularly in an era of deepening ‘austerity’ and public funding cuts. This dependence can also reinforce a set of cultural representations and ‘public stories’ about what domestic and sexual violence is: white, heterosexual, physical and perpetrated by ‘strong’ cisgender men against ‘weak’ cisgender women (Donovan, 2016; Donovan and Hester, 2014). Those who fail to successfully embody the white, middle class, heterosexual, non-disabled and cisgender codes of “the ideal victim” (Christie, 1986) can struggle to name violence and seek help from State agencies to seek justice and recovery. Specialist sexual and domestic violence services can be perceived as inaccessible to diverse survivors including queer, transgender, non-binary communities of colour and sex workers. This highlights a need to go beyond the State for solutions to gendered violence, to cultivate alternatives that are mindful of the ways survivors are already responding to violence without privileging State or formal agencies. Such alternatives may offer additional routes to long-term systemic change (Price, 2012; Lambie, 2015). The finding that survivors first seek help from friends and family rather than formal agencies highlights a need to better understand the potential of the community in challenging gendered violence (Kelly, 1996; Wilcox 2000)

### **Community alternatives**

A community can be defined as “a group of people in relationships based on common experience, identity, geography, values, beliefs, and/or politics” (Kershner et al., 2007: 21). Communities are complex and can overlap, fragment and reform and not even be conscious of being a community. However, informal community networks present possibilities for survivors to access support and challenge gendered violence (Wilcox, 2006). Restoring connection to the wider community has been argued to be central to sexual violence survivors’ recovery. Community activism can be a valuable source of meaning and connection, for instance, Judith Herman argues that: “women find this meaning by joining with others in social action [...] In refusing to hide or be silenced, in insisting that rape is a public matter, and in demanding social change, survivors create their own living monument” (1992: 73). Opportunities for community activism therefore offer survivors useful ways to recover and heal from trauma. The complex and challenging work of community accountability invites “communities to create options for responding to violence from within and to envision and create violence-free spaces and relationships” (Rojas Durazo, 2010: 78). This involves

critical self-examination of how the wider community sustains and condones violence alongside a commitment to create interventions to challenge violence and abuse within local contexts. Options include opportunities for the community to gain skills, awareness and knowledge of violence and abuse in reading or learning groups (Hereth and Rumpf, 2014); community accountability processes that involve the establishment of working groups to put in place practical strategies to support the survivor and hold the abuser accountable (Kelly, 2010; Caulfield, 2013); safer spaces policies (e.g. Audre Lorde Project, Safe OUTside the System and The Safe Neighbourhood Campaign, 2016); and the creation of alternative knowledges that privilege the voices and experiences of survivors and supporters (Chen, Dulani and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2011; Patterson, 2016).

Community-based responses are particularly crucial to contest the violence experienced within working class queer, trans and non-binary communities of colour and sex workers who are disproportionately targeted by State agencies and punitive policies. It is important to recognise that discussions of alternative responses within white-dominated social justice movements are only possible because of the struggles and work of people of colour who came before and established a legacy of self-determined community alternatives to address lived experiences of violence without seeking safety and protection from the police or statutory agencies. This includes community resistance to police brutality, gendered violence, violent clients and child sexual abuse (Law, 2011; Kershner, et al., 2007; INCITE! 2003; 2006; 2017; Sanders and Campbell, 2007; Kim 2010; Bierria, et al., 2011; Creative Interventions, 2012).

In a UK context, a legacy of Black British feminist activism highlights how Black and Asian women have self-organised to articulate their oppression and interests autonomously from the racist and sexist ideologies of the State and Western feminism (Carby, 1982; Amos and Parmar, 1984). During the 1970s and 1980s the women’s liberation movement enabled many women to name sexism and identify violence against women as a key injustice and demand change. There is evidence to suggest that the white women’s refuge movement has been more willing to engage in partnership opportunities with State agencies to improve police responses to male violence against women, particularly in a time when the police focused on property crime and refused to take violence against women seriously.<sup>3</sup> However, for black women, fear of the police and legal system, racism within the women’s liberation movement and solidarity with

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<sup>3</sup> Crimes Against Women Conferences Collection (1985); FAN/CAWC; Feminist Archive North, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

black men to resist racist State violence, meant many black, Asian and minority women organised autonomously from white women. For instance, demands for increased policing and Reclaim the Night marches through predominantly black areas of Leeds at a time of increased police brutality, illustrates differences in the interests and approaches of white women and black women during this period (Sudbury, 1998). Gendered violence experienced by women of colour can be predominantly perceived by the police as a problem of 'culture' or 'community attitudes' leaving black women survivors to be denied access to justice. Black women's resistance to imperialist and racist ideologies of black sexuality have illuminated the central role of community participation and activism in responding to gendered violence in Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in the UK (Southall Black Sisters, 1990; Siddiqui 2000; Gupta 2003; Gill and Rehman, 2004; Chantler, 2006).

In contrast, the use of community alternatives to challenge gendered violence within UK white-dominated Left social justice movements is relatively new. Community alternatives offer crucial opportunities for activists to challenge gendered violence without recourse to the State. This is important given the antagonistic relationship between social justice movements and the State. Research has revealed the use of State-sanctioned surveillance, infiltration and police violence against activists (Cunningham and Noakes, 2008; Lubbers, 2012; Jones, 2013; Gilmore, et al and Monk, 2016). For some activist survivors, the police are not an option, as Anna described to us: "I just don't trust cops. I've seen them do awful things with my own eyes, and they're not there to protect me, are they? And I think, if you're dealing with shit that involves power imbalance, then the cops don't seem that appealing". Survivors in activist communities may therefore be more likely to seek help and demand accountability within informal community networks rather than formal agencies. However, resistance to the demands for safety and accountability within social justice movements introduces an obstacle for survivors, supporters and anti-violence activists attempting community-based responses to gendered violence in the UK Left.

### **Counter-organising and resistance to anti-violence community activism**

The way a community responds to a disclosure of gendered violence can be as (or more) harmful than the violence as initially experienced. Mechanisms that discredit survivors' experiences and disrupt demands for accountability compound harm and hinder social justice movement building. For instance, in their analysis of staff-student sexual harassment in Universities, Leila Whitley and Tiffany Page (2015) highlighted how mechanisms at work in institutions and cultures enabled sexual violence, silenced women survivors and shut down opportunities for resistance. They draw upon the work of Judith Butler, Edward Said and Sara Ahmed to explain how sexual violence, as a practice of power, operates through concealment. Instead of naming sexual violence, institutional cultures normalised harassment and implemented procedures that denied responsibility. This effectively silenced women survivors and made accountability appear unreachable as "normalising power obscures and misnames women's experiences of harassment and hinders access to resources that could provide women with the tools to challenge the prevailing quiet" (Whitley and Page, 2015: 46).

Similarly, the silencing of survivors can be maintained in social justice movements through a practice known as 'counter organising' (INCITE!, 2003; 2006). Counter organising is described as involving "a higher level of the devaluation, deceit and manipulation which are all also a part of the dynamics of gender oppression and avoidance of accountability" (INCITE!, 2006: 284). It involves the harassment, isolation and disbelief of survivors and their supporters who raise the issue of gendered violence and demand accountability. It can also include abusers making counter-allegations of violence, claiming victimhood status, questioning the legitimacy of an accountability process and/or deliberately obstructing and drawing out the process to exhaust those involved. Whilst debates and critiques of community accountability and safer spaces are welcome, aggressive tactics that close off possibilities for survivors to name and resist violence undermines the transformative and inclusive potential of the Left. How can an activist community grounded in social justice principles replicate the structures and spaces that allow abusers to counter organise? What insights can be gained into how and why gendered violence persists in cultures and institutions in which legislation and legal reforms have apparently been 'secured'?

### The salvage research project

The salvage collective<sup>4</sup> began in November 2014 to bring together women, transgender and non-binary individuals who experience gender oppression, violence and abuse in activist communities. The salvage collective was initially envisioned as a network to share experiences, resources, skills and build communities of belief, support and action. It emerged from a need for better understandings of the character of violence, experiences and needs of survivors in activist communities identified in workshops that we facilitated independently from each other.<sup>5</sup> A small collective of three, the research collective and ten survivors carried out a research project to explore experiences of gendered violence, abuse and harm from the perspectives of survivors in the activist milieu of the UK Left (Downes, 2016; Downes, Hanson and Hudson, 2016). Ethical approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The Open University. Drawing on models of ‘research justice’ (Jolivet, 2015) and ‘participatory action research’ approaches that involve “a collaborative process of research, education and action explicitly orientated towards social transformation” (Kindon et al, 2009: 90) we carried out semi-structured interviews with 10 women and non-binary survivors<sup>6</sup> between August 2015 and January 2016.<sup>7</sup> Given that some survivors may be living in

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<sup>4</sup> More information is available at <http://projectsalvage.wordpress.com>

<sup>5</sup> ‘Victim-Survivor led Challenges to Violence and Abuse in our Communities’ and ‘Accountability Processes’ 19 October 2014, Queen Mary’s University <https://afem2014.wordpress.com>; ‘Gendered Abuse and Violence in Radical Activist Communities’, 29 November 2014, Quaker Meeting House, <https://ladyfestsheffield.wordpress.com>

<sup>6</sup> Most survivors we interviewed were women and/or working class. Our sample includes a transgender woman and a non-binary survivor. Half were living with a disability; half were currently working full or part-time. Just over half were non-heterosexual and described their sexuality as bisexual or queer. All the survivors we interviewed were white. More information about our sample is available in our zine-report (Downes, Hanson and Hudson, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> This project involved the collection of sensitive data about sexual violence from individuals from a small community within a context in which attempts to identify participants is a high risk. This means that this data cannot be made publicly accessible and steps have been taken to keep data secure and protect the identities of all survivors. A record of the research data is available: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/46915>. Access to anonymised interview transcripts is available on a restricted access basis for research teams and individuals approved by the research collective and survivors. Research teams and individuals will only be

situations of ongoing violence we developed a safety protocol, a first contact procedure (to make sure all survivors were contacted safely and in ways of their choosing) and a support services information and resources sheet (to signpost survivors to support if they needed it).<sup>8</sup> Survivors did not have to sign the consent form using their real name and no documentation was passed on if it was not safe to do so. All interviews were done in a place that was private, safe and comfortable and at a time and date of the survivor’s choosing. If safe to do so, we emailed the interview questions to the survivor in advance to allow them to prepare. All the interviews were audio recorded and anonymised during transcription. All transcripts were emailed to the survivor to check for accuracy and to make sure that it did not contain any information that could personally identify them. We have used pseudonyms for all participants. All survivors were invited to join the working group and were encouraged to take part as much or as little as they wished in future meetings and communications. The research collective signed a confidentiality agreement to consolidate and demonstrate our commitment to keeping all transcripts, data and recordings safe and not share or discuss the content of the interviews outside the research collective.<sup>9</sup> The interviews generated 243 pages of transcript. The qualitative data analysis was carried out by the research collective in collaboration with survivors. This demanded each member of the research collective to read each interview, develop and discuss initial themes at research collective meetings. Two preliminary results discussion meetings (Sheffield and London) in April 2016 were held with survivors, activists and partners across the country to discuss our

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able to access research data on The Open University premises, are not permitted to copy the data and are required to sign a confidentiality statement.

<sup>8</sup> All of our fieldwork materials (information sheet, flyers, informed consent form, support services and information sheet, joint working accountability agreement and research team confidentiality agreement) are available to view and download at <https://projectsalvage.wordpress.com/research>. We are happy to share our Safety Protocol on request.

<sup>9</sup> This project involved the collection of sensitive data about sexual violence from individuals from a small community within a context in which attempts to identify participants is a high risk. This means that this data cannot be made publicly accessible and steps have been taken to keep data secure and protect the identities of all survivors. A record of the research data is available: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/46915>. Access to anonymised interview transcripts is available on a restricted access basis for research teams and individuals approved by the research collective and survivors. Research teams and individuals will only be able to access research data on The Open University premises, are not permitted to copy the data and are required to sign a confidentiality statement.

provisional themes. Based on the feedback from these discussions the coding frame was finalised and applied to the entire dataset using NVivo by the author. We launched an activist-facing zine-report at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies in September 2016 and facilitated a series of five one-day workshops across the UK funded by the Feminist Review Trust in November and December 2016.

Subsequent discussion and responses to our research project have highlighted a need for critical self-examination and accountability within our research collective. As a small research collective of three white women, the lens through which we framed the project, including our approach, assumptions and definitions, are limited. The data allows me to say more about gender, sexuality and class and less about race as all-white sample of survivors restricts these discussions and limits the transformative potential of the project. Whiteness is assumed and unspeakable in the UK Left as one survivor Erin raised “we’re not talking about race; we need to talk about race because nearly everybody is white [...] It’s not people of colours responsibility to resolve this or to bring it up. We have to bring it up”. Further work is needed for us to interrogate structures of white supremacy within the UK Left, our collective and the pre-existing concepts, methods and disciplines that we draw on; to decolonize our activism, research approaches and assumptions and re-centre people of colour in the future. For instance, although many of the survivors we interviewed did not identify as ‘activists’ our project tended to privilege visible organisations and campaigns over everyday actions carried out in public spaces and informal support networks. Such actions tend not to earn the label ‘activist’ but address everyday challenges of survival, dignity and making life liveable, particularly for working class women of colour (Bryan et al, 1985; Enke 2007).

### **Silencing sexual violence activism**

A condition of secrecy about the widespread problem of sexual violence was shared and known between survivors involved in the salvage research project. The condition of secrecy inhibits open acknowledgement of living with violence within an activist community. For instance, Lydia described how ‘Almost every woman who I think of has had a bad experience with someone in the scene. So, part of it is that we’re just not talking about it enough. Every time someone disclosed to me it was always something that’s already happened they were already safe so there’s nothing I could do but it was always “please don’t tell anyone” “please don’t tell anyone he’s like this”’. Secrecy prevents survivors

from speaking openly about their experiences and exacerbates that harm that survivors experience, as Beth explained, "It's not the abuse that kills you it's the silence around it that's the killer". However painful silence and secrecy is, the personal costs for survivors and their supporters who publicly break this silence and violate the condition of secrecy can be even worse.

1. *Discrediting survivors and supporters*

A common tactic to restore silence is to discredit survivors and their supporters. Sympathy can be short lived. If not quietened or explained away the voices and presence of survivors can expose hypocrisy within social justice movements. To make sure nobody listens to survivors and their supporters and reunify the community around already established values and common goals, they must be made wrong. Subjecting survivors and supporters to intense scrutiny effectively redirects attention and responsibility from the abuser and the wider community. In contrast to the survivor, the abuser demands nothing from the wider community, which can be much easier to hear, as Herman described "it is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing" (Herman, 1992: 7). The ability to achieve and sustain credibility in the activist community, that is to be listened to and believed, once an accusation of sexual violence has been made, is more achievable for activists with privilege i.e. who are older, white, middle class, heterosexual, non-disabled and cisgender men. In contrast working class, disabled, queer and bisexual, women, transgender and non-binary survivors can struggle to be recognised as credible political agents. Some women and non-binary survivors perceived a barrier of disbelief within their activist communities, as Micah described: "I just feel like I've always got to start from a position of like people aren't going to believe me". Some women survivors were particularly frustrated by cisgender men's refusals to listen to survivors, as Hayley described: "I just felt dead affronted that he would not listen to his fellow female activists. If they alleged that someone had assaulted them, how insulting. I felt really insulted".

In some situations, the survivor may wish to remain anonymous, often to avoid harassment. However, the desire of the wider activist community to know the identity of the survivor can become central in deciding whether to listen, believe and support a survivor. As Grace explained: "people were like "I want to know who is it?" because who it is effects whether or not it's true. Because that's what they were getting at. They were getting at if they're a responsible, respected person then they're telling the truth. If they are a druggie with mental health problems they might be making it up". Once identified, vulnerabilities often used

by abusers to target and coerce survivors, particularly mental health, substance misuse and disabilities, were also used to discredit survivors if they spoke out publicly about the violence they had experienced. For instance, in the Hedley/Leneghan case introduced above, Hedley used mental health to undermine Leneghan's credibility and bolster counter-claims of violence and victimhood in a public blog-post. The statement signed 'Steve Hedley, cleared of domestic violence' stated that "I stayed with Ms. Leneghan because she was attending therapy twice a week in an attempt to control her violent outbursts, she suffers from a condition known as Borderline Personality Disorder and has a history of violence, severe self-harm and attempted suicide" (Hedley, 2013). Similarly, Breanna, who revealed that she had been raped by a high-profile male activist in her community, explained: 'He's been saying I'm not reliable. He gaslit me. When I was kicking off about him being sexually predatory it was because I was a bit mad and "sexuality is the first thing to go love"'. A form of respectability politics, based on white middle-class heterosexual non-disabled cisgender norms, can be mobilised to discredit survivors, undermine their experiences and enable the powerful to control the narrative of events and evade accountability.

Within UK Left spaces hostility towards feminism offers another way to discredit survivors and their supporters. Feminism, as a rich resource to acknowledge, name and connect acts of gendered violence and abuses of power can become positioned as a disruptive and malignant right-wing force within the Left (Phipps, 2014). Anti-feminist sentiment within the Left can be experienced as ubiquitous, as Lydia described, "I think there's really negative impressions still out there of people who identify as being feminist that you're a killjoy that if you don't go along with certain things then you're ruining everyone's experience". Lydia's use of the term killjoy to explain her experience relates well to the concept of the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010). Ahmed argues that the promise of happiness is a process of concealment that hides inequalities and justifies the oppression of 'others' under the rubric of the 'good life'. This positions various 'others', including feminists and survivors, as threats who can expose the unhappiness that is the violence and abuse within social justice movements. Survivors and their supporters, rather than the culture of the UK Left, can be blamed and held responsible for the negativity and bad feeling of the sexism that they are pointing out. For instance, Erin, who at the time she was interviewed had not spoken publicly about being raped by a fellow activist, reflected on the perception of an 'anti-men' feminism that threatened to undermine and discredit her experience of violence:

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You’re either an angel or a witch so either wonderful or you’re out for revenge. You want to destroy all men you’re some kind of uber-feminist who wants to kill all men. It’s this idea that you can’t ever say anything and just mean it. You’re either doing it because you hate everybody or you’re doing it because you just can’t help being wonderful. And that’s really frustrating because you think well in activist circles shouldn’t we be trying to break that down but it’s still scary because you think people are just going to think that I’m just trying to get revenge.

The dismissal of survivors’ experiences of violence as personal vendettas and means of revenge relates to the ‘myth of the vengeful victim’ (Herman, 2005) that circulates in wider society. This myth demonstrates a deep distrust of survivors’ anger and fear of the impact of unrequited demands for accountability on a community: “the victim’s passionate indignation is commonly viewed as a disruptive force, disturbing the peace of the community that is called on to redress the victim’s wrongs” (Herman, 2005: 576). There are costs to speaking out about violence in these contexts, as Hayley, who experienced harassment as a member of a safer spaces working group, explained: “that’s what happens to women who try and take control of dealing with the issue of abusive behaviour in their community”.

Feminist killjoys and vengeful agendas are echoed in the wider community responses to high-profile cases that discredited survivors and their supporters. For instance, the survivors who accused Assange were discredited as pawns either for the CIA, radical feminist or neoconservative ‘dark forces’ who had deliberately set up a ‘honey trap’ using a ‘nice pink sweater’ (Assange, 2011; Phipps, 2014; Crouch, 2015). The organisation Justice for Assange<sup>10</sup> maintains that the case was dragged out for political gain by the prosecutor Marianne Ny and Swedish politician Claes Borgström, supporters of the survivors. This allows allegations to be dismissed as part of a conspiracy by a ‘man-hating lesbian’ (Norman, 2012) to trap Assange into a ‘hornet’s nest of revolutionary feminists’ (Miriam, 2010). The danger of a feminist conspiracy to dismantle the radical left also informed the harassment experienced by supporters of W in the ‘Comrade Delta’ case:

The lies spread included accusations that we were in collusion with the state to destroy the party, that W was a woman scorned because D broke up with her, that it was just a relationship that

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<sup>10</sup> Further information about this organisation can be found here:  
<https://justice4assange.com/>

ended badly even though we had made clear no relationship had occurred, and politically we were labelled autonomist feminists with a secret agenda to undermine democratic centralism and the Leninist tradition. (Simon F, Viv S and Rita M, cited in Collins 2013)

The ability to successfully perform credibility and compel others to recognise injustice and take action is only a possibility for a minority of survivors in an activist community. For instance, Grace, a working-class feminist woman, found that her anti-violence work and activism was consistently discredited: “They weren’t afraid of “oh no ‘Grace’s’ gone and accused us of this” but if someone cool or like more respected like [name] or someone that’d been really well connected and someone that’s respected if they’d said this maybe they’d want to act on it more”. This highlights the need to centre an analysis of power in situations of competing accounts. A desire to reunite the activist community can compel activists to question the credibility of survivors, to collude in a silencing of survivors and their supporters, and return to business as usual. However, this promise of happiness or a unity that subjugates ‘others’ is inadequate, as Hayley reflected: “there are some benefits to that kind of real united against a common enemy thing like but at what cost?”

## 2. *Questioning the legitimacy of claims*

Another tactic to restore silence involves questioning the legitimacy of the accusations and claims made by survivors and their supporters. To insist that it did not happen. This can involve the creation of counter-arguments of conspiracy, attack and victimisation by a more powerful enemy. Accusations of destructive right-wing motives behind the complaints of rape and sexual assault can circulate. For example, the ‘reality’ behind the accusations made against Assange was reframed as a state conspiracy to extradite him to the US to face charges associated with leaking private and confidential information via WikiLeaks. Mark Stephens, Julian Assange’s lawyer stated that, “Dark forces are at work. After what we’ve seen so far you can reasonably conclude this is part of a greater plan.” (cited in Razaq, Woodhouse and Bentham, 2010). This is a particularly effective argument in the Left given the hostility to the increased counter-insurgency of social justice movements (Jones, 2013; Lubbers, 2012). This enables some commentators to position “state protection of women from sexual violence as a tool for the United States’s criminalization of a person whose actions have threatened U.S. military interests” (Spade and Willse, 2014: 6). Therefore, counter-claims of victimhood can be made by the privileged, to deflect from the

experiences of survivors and a need for accountability. The possibility that both scenarios could be true (i.e. that sexual violence happens and the State has an interest in the extradition of Julian Assange) can be discounted.

Consequently, some on the UK Left became preoccupied with this sophisticated repositioning of sexual violence as a tool for the State to 'witch-hunt' activists and "discredit the whole of the revolutionary left" (Sell, 2013). This paranoia can linger around discussions of sexual violence in activist organisations, as Micah recalled "I remember at some point in my local [activist organisation] there was. I think it was actually to do with creating a complaints procedure but like immediately a guy put his hand up [about] how the complaints procedure could be abused "oh I could just make something up about this guy because I don't like him"". Similarly, Grace, who raised serious concerns about ongoing sexual violence in a social centre, faced criticism from activists who accused her of ruining the reputation of the social centre and those associated with the space. Interestingly several male activists deployed feminist language to claim victimhood and argue that her actions had made them unsafe:

I met up with a couple of them individually. The cis[gender] men I met said that they felt unsafe because they thought that I'd been blabbing around everywhere and that I was turning people against the [social centre] and that people weren't friends with them anymore because they didn't get invited to other stuff. They thought it was because I'd said bad things about the place and those that lived there. [...] I felt they were abusing the whole discourse of safer spaces saying "I don't feel safe in the [social centre] because what if someone comes and does something there because they're pissed off about the rumours of rape apology". But to be honest serious violence and feeling uncomfortable you can't compare them it's bullshit and one guy he was getting under my skin, hijacking safer spaces in this way.

This leads into the third tactic of silencing in activist organisations that questions the credibility of community alternatives.

### 3. *Questioning the legitimacy of community accountability processes*

Another tactic involves questioning the legitimacy of community alternatives to detract from the need to be accountable and shut down the possibility of accountability in activist communities. Subsequently safer spaces and community accountability processes, often driven by survivors and supporters, have been subjected to intense scrutiny and distortion by men and women in the UK Left. Some critics, such as Anonymous Refused, point blame at a 'safer spaces movement' that advocates the exclusion of those deemed unsafe and the use of elitist vocabulary to police activists. In this line of thinking activists can be encouraged to attribute bad feelings around the impasse of sexual violence in activist communities to a punitive and illegitimate safer spaces movement:

the whole issue has become, frankly, terrifying. There are more and more people scared to be involved in political organising, scared to go to social events, look on facebook or twitter, for fear that they may be excluded or denounced in the name of safer spaces, or for fear of being reminded of previous, deeply upsetting – some might even say 'traumatic' – experiences of exclusion or denunciation [...] Though the denunciation of the example, the forcible excision of the unsafe tumour in the communal body, everyone else attempts thereby to purify themselves. This is the definition of scapegoating. The process never ends, though, because it disavows (despite paying constant lip service to) the oppressive tendencies in all of us, rather than honestly confronting them. The communal body, unsurprisingly, remains ill, so yet another tumour must be identified and the accountability surgeon called again. The taboo spreads, farcically at times. (Anonymous Refused, 2014).

Instead of creating alternatives to address harm and develop cultures of safety and accountability the 'safer spaces movement' is held responsible for harming others and obstructing accountability using 'illusory and poisonous' processes (Left Unity, 2014). Whilst our own data pointed to the potential for abusers to wield the language of feminism to further control and isolate survivors (Downes, Hanson and Hudson, 2016), other critics have been careful to distinguish 'actual abuse' from 'overstated harm' in discussions of conflict and accountability in activist lives (Schulman, 2016). However, the issue returns to who has the credibility and privilege to name what constitutes 'actual' violence and abuse and be believed.

Instead of a coherent safer spaces movement, our data suggests that community accountability processes are being developed by a relatively

small dispersed network of activists and survivors who frequently face opposition in their local communities. For instance, Collette described: "I'd like people to have more of an understanding of safer spaces and there tends to be again a kind of constant slight drip drip not liking of safer spaces that kind of you always feel it's under intense scrutiny and whatever you do is going to be wrong". Some survivors were involved in activist spaces who actively resisted the formalisation of a safer spaces policy, as Erin described:

There was a big discussion about how 'oh we don't need that because we already do it'. A lot of women were just like 'well if you're already doing it then what's the problem in writing it down?' Because sometimes you get people coming in the [space] who, are behaving in an inappropriate way and you need to, it gets to the point where you need to remove them. And some of those people don't like it unless you've got it written down. And I think a lot of people said 'well we don't need it written down it's our [space] we'll decide' and we were like 'yeah but also if you're the only person working on the bar having a bit of paper with it on can actually help you' so after much discussion there is one now.

Whilst there is widespread condemnation of gendered violence within the activist community, who determines how it should be responded to is deeply contested. Women and non-binary survivors can find their needs and interests quashed by the needs of the more privileged to maintain the gender order and broader status quo. For instance, Hayley reflected on the hostility she experienced as part of a safer spaces group at a social centre:

I actually think that a lot of men who kind of were involved in this backlash like 'yes we're against the abuse of women' they are against rape and domestic abuse and they think it's awful and child abuse is awful. But it should be them who decide and them who protect and them who make the decisions. They're fine with it until the women get the power and the women get the say and actually yes survivors can say 'you did this to me and you know what I'm not going to prosecute you because I probably won't be successful, can you just get out of my social centre please and be glad that you're not going to prison' because that's all. It's not justice there's no punishment. I mean for fuck's sake look at the place how mean we are. [...] The way people have reacted to safer spaces it's just been phenomenal.

Whilst exclusion from a space was often taken as a temporary measure by survivors to encourage the abuser to think through the impact of their behaviour and access support. Abusers and others in the community often put pressure on survivors to permit the abuser access to these spaces. Partial solutions to this included allowing the abuser to attend events or meetings when the survivor was not present. This response effectively located the problem of violence in individuals, rather than the wider culture or community, and placed the burden of managing safety on the survivor, as Collette experienced:

Part of the thing that annoys me is that there's a lack of trust of survivors. That we have to be really transparent and say "this is why I've done this" there isn't a sense of, "oh ok". This other guy who's been saying "oh can we not try and work out how to get him back down". So it's like why can't you just trust me? It's like a really frustrating thing. That I'm having to like constantly justify and explain and educate people about what's going on.

A distinct self-protective cultural practice of trust that operates within activist communities can lead to an over-emphasis on exclusion within community accountability processes. In contrast, some survivors saw community accountability as a practice of care that explicitly offers an abuser an opportunity to learn and change their behaviour with support from their peers. For instance, Erin explained, "that's what an accountability process is trying to do. It's trying to span this void between the black and the white of you're in the trusted circle or you're out and you're out forever. You're trying to say what you did was untrustworthy but you can change that". The distortion and intense scrutiny afforded to community accountability work effectively erases the lived experiences of survivors and detracts from a call to hold the accused accountable, or a need to self-examine and transform social justice movements into cultures of accountability.

#### 4. *Avoiding troubling recognitions*

The next silencing strategy involves avoiding opportunities to recognise and learn about sexual violence and community accountability. This practice allows a community to evade responsibility for creating the circumstances that permit sexual violence. Stan Cohen defines denial as the "need to be innocent of a troubling recognition" (Cohen, 2001: 25). The avoidance of knowing also relates to what Kristie Dotson terms 'pernicious ignorance', an ignorance that "causes or contributes to a harmful practice, in this case, a harmful practice of silencing" (2011: 239). This means that remaining uninformed and unaware of ongoing sexual

violence and alternative community responses can further harm and silence survivors and their supporters.

Survivors and their supporters frequently encountered criticisms that demonstrated a lack of understanding of community accountability principles. For instance, Collette recalled how “sometimes it’s not even a valid criticism because they’ve got the wrong end of the stick”. Some survivors, supporters and activists created and invited the community into spaces of learning about sexual violence and community accountability, to help develop knowledge, confidence and skills. However, Collette found that turnout at such workshops and events tended to be low, with the most critical activists being absent from workshops and events:

people need to educate themselves. We’ve held workshops down here but people don’t [come], the people who complain the most are the least likely to turn up to the workshops. I’d like [it] if people explored within themselves what it is that makes them so hostile”. Similarly, Grace set up a discussion event, “the idea was for it to be abstract and for the people in the [social centre] to come and learn about different ways of dealing with it so that they could deal with it and we’d help them and none of them came. Some of them were ill, genuinely ill, but most of them were really hungover from a party.

Avoiding opportunities to learn and self-examine can be thought of as a form of ‘pernicious ignorance’ (Dotson, 2011) in which activists in the wider community choose to stay unaware and uninformed, even whilst simultaneously delegitimising and discrediting survivors, supporters and community accountability strategies. This sets up community alternatives to inevitably fail and the burden of sexual violence activism can become increasingly concentrated within a small group of survivors and their supporters.

##### 5. *Placing the burden on survivors*

In the absence of a supportive and informed community the final tactic of silencing involves the increased burden of care and support work falling to survivors themselves. The difficult and complex work of supporting survivors living with trauma is left to women and non-binary of survivors and supporters. For instance, Micah described how:

Always find like I’m supporting other survivors and they’re supporting me for the most part we’re non-binary people and women. And men don’t do any of the work in making people aware

of abusers, supporting people when they're having panic attacks and stuff. [...] I think having friends around particularly friends who are also survivors has been good but also I feel like I don't like putting all the pressure on them because I know. It is very stressful. I like being there to support other people but also it is really hard.

The absence of cisgender men in doing this caring and emotional labour leaves gendered hierarchies of social justice movements intact. The lack of a supportive activist community can make it difficult for survivors to speak out about what they have experienced and demand accountability. For instance, Erin spoke about a 'weight of responsibility' wherein once her experience is made public she anticipated pressure on her to act and be responsible for the process:

The weight of responsibility then starts and you're like well I don't want to tell anyone because once I tell people then I've got to do something. So then you don't tell people because you think well if I tell my friends or the people in my kind of activist community about this then I'm going to have to do something, and I don't think I can do anything yet so I won't tell anyone because then I don't have to do anything. And it becomes this kind of cycle of silence where you just go well I won't say anything because I don't have the capacity to do anything about it and that's what I'll be expected to do and it becomes like overbearing.

The fear of scrutiny and burden of responsibility involved in demanding accountability for the violence experienced in a community that is unable to support survivors and address sexual violence completes a cycle of silence.

## Conclusion

In closing, our research project is partial and has its limitations, particularly our inability to disrupt whiteness and white supremacy in UK Left social justice movements as well as our research collective. However, our interviews with survivors, alongside public commentary, revealed the circulation of secrecy and silencing strategies within social justice communities. The condition of secrecy and attempts to restore silence harms survivors. The focus of this article, on the practices of 'counter-organising' (INCITE!, 2003; 2006), illuminated how survivors' experiences can be erased and community alternatives be presented as unreachable. Silencing strategies effectively dismantled and undermined resources, alternative responses and sources of support. Silence and secrecy

enabled abusers and the community to evade accountability and avoid critical examination of hegemonic power relations within activist communities. Survivors and their supporters who continued to speak out, demand and enact accountability faced significant challenges.

Survivors and supporters can be ‘made wrong’ through attacks on their credibility, hostility to feminism and constructions of vengeful motives. Claims of sexual violence can be dismissed and reframed as a tool to attack and divide the activist community. Attempted community alternatives to address violence can be distorted and subjected to intense scrutiny. Survivors and supporters involved in anti-violence activism can be constructed as bearers of illegitimate and punitive power. Invitations to gain knowledge, skills and raise awareness of sexual violence and alternative responses can be evaded. This can effectively displace the burden and labour of supporting survivors to a small and disparate group of women and non-binary survivors, allowing the core of the social justice movement to continue as normal. Crucially the ability to name injustice, to compel others to act to resist such injustice remains a preserve of the most powerful within social justice movements. In the case of women and non-binary survivors demanding accountability for gendered violence, entanglements of silencing strategies effectively set community alternatives up to fail. This reflects calls from sexual violence survivors for better ‘recognition’ of the role that society and culture play in undermining survivors and condoning sexual violence in criminal justice responses (McGlynn, et al, 2017). The silencing of survivors and their supporters represents a missed opportunity for the Left to provide a valuable space for survivors to develop community alternatives and transform society as part of a process of recovery and healing. This would undoubtedly be a valuable contribution to both the Left and wider society.

The salvage research project documented and honoured the lived experiences of survivors and illustrated the ongoing dynamics of gender oppression within UK Left social justice movements. Such white-dominated social justice movements have a lot to learn from a more considered engagement with community alternatives to address gendered violence and oppression largely developed by communities of colour (Southall Black Sisters, 1990; Siddiqui, 2000; Gupta, 2003; Gill and Rehman, 2004; Chantler, 2006; Law, 2011; Kershner, et al., 2007; INCITE! 2003, 2006, 2007; Kim, 2010; Kelly, 2010; Bierria, 2011; Chen, et al, 2011; Creative Interventions, 2012; Caulfield, 2013; Patterson, 2016). Community alternatives, such as community accountability processes can help survivors to recover from trauma and harm experienced and compounded within activist communities. For instance, as Breanna put it:

They've [the community accountability working group] restored my hope in people. They've made me believe which a lot of people didn't. [...] They've un-sprung me. I was in therapy for 6 months going "I'm stuck I'm bitter I'm suicidal something needs to change and I don't know what it is and if it doesn't I'm going to end up dead" and they were the change they un-sprung me. Literally. I was like that. It's like being carried and I don't think they'll ever know ever ever know exactly how much they've done.

In the context of Brexit, a Conservative minority government who at the time of writing are seeking an alliance with far right-wing Democratic Unionist Party, an expanding prison industrial complex and the inauguration of a US President who has bragged about sexually assaulting women, social justice movements need to strive to be crucial places of sanctuary. The needs and wellbeing of the most marginalised, including survivors, need to be centred in an agenda for social change and transformation.

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