

# OPEN LETTER TO THE ANTI-RAPE MOVEMENT

Robin Mcduff, Deanne Pernell & Karen Saunders  
Santa Cruz Women Against Rape, 1977



PRISON IS NOT FEMINIST



Zine conceived by Mariame Kaba  
Designed by Hope Dector

## INTRODUCTION

by Mariame Kaba (2020)

I got involved in anti-rape organizing in 1989 when I was in college. I wanted to volunteer at a crisis center earlier while in high school but was turned away (that is a story for another day). After college, I continued to volunteer, and then work, at rape crisis centers and domestic violence organizations. By then (the late 1980s), the anti-violence against women and girls movement (now more broadly termed the anti-gender based violence movement) was already well on its way to becoming a professionalized field. Professionalization eroded peer to peer support models which engaged survivors/victims in helping other survivors through support groups and counseling. It pressured people to identify as “experts” and discouraged community members from taking leadership within the work. It pushed survivors of violence out of the field claiming that they were still “in crisis” so shouldn’t be leaders and it removed organizing as a path to healing.

It is important to remember that the anti-rape movement of the early 1970s emerged out of a radical women’s movement that was suspicious of relying too heavily on the state to address its concerns. Early grassroots rape crisis centers explicitly operated outside of the social service paradigm and focused on mutual aid. They did not mainly rely on law enforcement and the courts. Some worried that accepting money from the state would make the movement beholden to its interests.

When I entered the field, we were far removed from the origins of the modern movement of the early 70s and continued to move further astray. Today, the anti-violence field is replete with well-meaning therapists, social workers, and advocates who have come to this work with a social service orientation. Andrea Smith, feminist scholar-activist, provides some context:

“For the anti-violence movement, the shift toward bureaucratization coincided with the influx of federal and state dollars into anti-violence programs, particularly with the Violence Against Women Act. Anti-violence groups then began to shift their focus

## AFTERWORD

by Jes Skolnik (2020)

I first read “Letter to the Anti-Rape Movement” in the late ‘90s, in the process of cataloging and digitizing a collection of *Off Our Backs*. At the same time, I was both volunteering at a fairly conventional women’s shelter and doing direct survivor support work for and with other survivors, which was based in my own nascent anarcho-feminist practice. I was shocked at how much the frustrations and criticisms in the letter mirrored my own—the purposeful depoliticization of the shelter in order to access funding, and its willingness to work with the criminal justice system in an uncritical way, were perhaps the biggest ones. It was 20 years later, and it seemed like nothing had changed—if anything, the nonprofit-industrial complex had only ossified and fused with a kind of larger mainstream depoliticized “feminism,” a mainstream feminism friendly to capitalism.

There’s much about the open letter that is still useful; what feels most dated is a fairly simplistic power analysis and limited language (it does not feel transphobic, but also doesn’t feel trans-inclusive, for instance). A letter today might have a more complex power analysis, owing not just to the 43 years of feminist and broader radical activist work since then, but to the work that was, at the time, unknown or unrecognized by the authors. It could look at how damaging the narrative about rape put forth by mainstream feminism can be for those most marginalized in the US, how survivors ourselves are often criminalized, and how non-profit organizations (NPOs) themselves can be exploitative workplaces.

## centering ourselves

We see ourselves as a political group that offers educational services and tries to provide alternatives, not in an isolated context, but to broaden people's awareness of different forms of oppression, and the need to change the system. We call ourselves socialist feminists, and are working to build a strong revolutionary local movement with good politics about rape. We see the need for a strong national (and international) revolutionary movement that will provide the supportive context for our anti-rape work. We want to remain in close contact with the anti-rape movement. We want to be part of an anti-rape movement that can give support to, and build ties with other progressive movements. That is one reason we're writing this letter. We hope that the ideas and issues raised in this letter will serve to spark discussion and debate within the anti-rape groups, and the left movement as a whole. We are very interested in any feedback anyone who reads this has. We are especially interested in making contact with those groups and individuals who are interested in exploring alternatives! Please write us at: Santa Cruz Women Against Rape, P.O. Box 711, Santa Cruz, California, 95061, or call us at (408) 426-RAPE.

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

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

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

from anti-violence organizing to anti-violence support services. With the restrictions that federal monies often place on the type of work anti-violence groups can do, their work became state-friendly (such as calling for increased criminalization of domestic and sexual violence) rather than state-resistant (such as violence-prevention initiatives or alternatives to incarceration)."

I am now entering my 31st year of working in this area (as an activist, advocate, organizer or worker) and consider myself an exile of the funded anti-rape and anti-domestic violence fields. From my position of exile, I am committed to reclaiming a model for addressing harm that does not rely on the punishing state as the first resort to mete out so-called "justice."

In that, I am part of a lineage of anti-prison feminists who challenged the idea that policing and prisons were the solution to interpersonal violence.

Early on, the anti-rape and anti-domestic violence movements were riddled with internal tensions between those who worried that the movements would be co-opted by the state and those who deeply believed that the state needed to be responsive to the demands of penal punishment.

In 1977, feminists from Santa Cruz Women Against Rape wrote an open letter published in off our backs and circulated it among activists across the country. It opened with these words:

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

against rape must be waged simultaneously with the fight against all other forms of oppression.

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

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

Despite these concerns, carceral feminists won the day. The anti-rape and

confrontation.)

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

#### **sweeping away the myths**

Another concern of ours is the lack of the development of anti-racist politics and practice in the anti-rape movement. Historically, rape has been a tool used against Third World people. The sexist myth that women "ask for it", and lie about rape is applied many times more to all Third World women than it is to White women. Black women have been particularly subject to rape by White men from slavery on up to the present, for society has never given them any protection. In addition, rape was a primary weapon used against women in the genocidal campaign against Native Americans. The myth that most rapists are Black men has had enormous consequence for them. Thousands of Black men have been lynched or legally executed because they "looked at a White woman wrong." Of the 450 legal executions for rape, 408 of these men were Black. It is crucial that anti-rape groups fight the racist myths, stereotypes, and institutions that are associated with rape. The first step in this process is to stop supporting the criminal justice system, because no matter what our intentions are, the system is racist through and through. Prisons are used to keep all Third World people down. We cannot turn our backs to the racism of the system when a Black man is being prosecuted and expect that same racism not to be used against Joann Little, Yvonne Wanrow, Inez Garcia, etc. As we've said before, we must not support a racist process for any end. We must fight racism and sexism together.

alternatives, because we think that the responsibility for dealing with rape should be in the hands of all community people. Some of the ideas and alternatives we're working on now include:

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

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

anti-domestic violence fields were incredibly successful at passing laws and at creating new categories of "crimes." The focus on getting the police to become more responsive to these instances of violence led to a symbiotic relationship between anti-violence advocates and law enforcement, a relationship which actually endangers and criminalizes particular survivors. In addition, professionalization delegitimizes and erases the voices of those in the field who resist carceral interventions as the main solution to ending gender-based violence.

The collaboration between these fields and the police has been destructive for the safety of many survivors of violence. Many survivors regularly tell me that they DO NOT want to involve the police or the courts in their lives. They simply want the violence to end. This is not unusual. Fewer than half of the people who are victims of crime ever call the police. Most people prefer nothing as opposed to the current criminal punishment system. That's a real indictment of the current system.

The reality is that most victims of sexual assault do not turn to the criminal legal system in the first place and most rapists will not go to prison. Out of every 1000 sexual assaults, 230 are reported to law enforcement. 46 lead to arrest, 9 get referred to prosecutors, 5 lead to a felony conviction, and fewer than 5 will lead to incarceration. (Source: RAINN.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system). If the goal is to end rape through a criminal legal process then I would say that based on the numbers, the strategy has already failed.

I first read the open letter from Santa Cruz Women Against Rape in the mid-90s. It was a balm. I was already becoming disenchanted with the funded anti gender-based violence field. The survivors I was working with consistently rejected what we were offering, which were mainly legal solutions. That open letter sent me down a rabbit hole to learn more about the actual history of anti-rape and anti-domestic violence organizing. I learned that at every point in history ideas were contested. One side won and others lost. History did not play out as a series of waves but rather as contests and fights.

Currently in this #MeToo moment, there is a renewed interest in sexual violence by some members of the public. I welcome the interest. It's

important however to learn from the past and to avoid past mistakes. We will not end rape through criminalization. The women of Santa Cruz Women Against Rape warned us of this in 1977. I wanted to make this zine to introduce the open letter to a new generation of activists, organizers, and workers who may not yet have encountered it. I invite everyone who encounters this publication to read the letter and discuss it with your communities. What resonates with you about the letter? What is surprising to you? What is still relevant today? What feels dated to you? If you were to write an open letter to the anti-rape movement today, what would you say?

My own open letter to the anti-rape movement, written in 2020, would point out that prisons and policing abuse and violate people by design. Their dynamics mirror interpersonal domestic and sexual violence. This is a feature, not a bug. The prison in particular is, as law professor and activist Dean Spade contends, a “serial rapist.” When we sentence people to prison, we are essentially sentencing them to judicial rape. Criminalization is inherently sexual violence. It isn’t simply co-constitutive of sexual violence. It IS state enactment of gender violence. If you don’t believe me, think of the routine strip searches (that take place in carceral spaces). Prisoners are of course subjected to these but so too are the people who visit them. Cavity searches of people driving their own cars are a regular part of policing. The sexual violation of pat downs during stop and frisks are routine. In addition, by rigidly enforcing the gender binary, prisons isolate, punish and target people who do not conform to existing norms of gender expression and presentation. In short, prisons and jails routinely deploy and maintain gendered violence. Criminalization reproduces and maintains gender-based violence.

Prison is not feminist. Oppression and domination are main features of the prison industrial complex (PIC). Feminist political theorist Charlotte Bunch suggests that feminism “as a political perspective is about change in structures – about ending domination and resisting oppression.” By this definition, prisons cannot be feminist. If as Angela Davis suggests: “The prison is a key component of the state’s coercive apparatus, the overriding function of which is to ensure social control,” then how can a feminism that seeks to end domination and resist oppression embrace the prison as a core strategy for eradicating violence?

success of the end.

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

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

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

### **centering ourselves**

The time and energy that is now used to develop a good working relationship with the criminal justice system agencies, and on reform legislation, could be much better spent. Instead, the anti-rape movement should work on community education, and on developing practical alternatives that deal with both the systems and the roots of sexism and violence. We want our focus to be the creation of various community based and supported

information on how to report a rape and what the police and hospital procedures are. They don't present any other options besides going to the police or doing nothing. Therefore, if a woman feels that she'd like to do something about her rape, but the only thing she is told about is the police, her probable choice would be to go to the police. Because there aren't many alternatives, we support the right of individual rape victims to go through the criminal justice system. We don't feel that she should be forced or pushed into anything, whether reporting or not reporting a rape to the police. But as anti-rape groups, we have the responsibility to expose the function, and challenge the process, of the criminal justice system. Attempts at "good relations" with the criminal justice system have served to co-opt our movement, and have led to the belief (or hope) that the criminal justice system can solve the problem of rape. Yet, the sexist and racist nature of the criminal justice system only makes the problem worse.

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

### **keep the end in sight**

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

We cannot focus on addressing vulnerabilities and violence through criminalization, which is always racialized, gendered and heteronormed. A key question in 2020 must be: "How do we create safety outside of carceral logics?" This is where our attention and organizing must focus.

Take a pass at writing your own open letter to the anti-rape movement. We need more manifestos.

I am grateful to my friend Hope Dector for designing this zine and to my friend Jes Skolnik for offering a few words in closing. Thank you to Aim Ren Beland and Asha Edwards for their art.

In solidarity,

### **Mariame Kaba**

Founder & Director, Project NIA

Co-Founder & organizer, Survived & Punished

Co-Founder & researcher, Interrupting Criminalization: Research in Action at the Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW)

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### **Recommended Reading**

*Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation.*  
Beth E. Richie (NYU Press, 2012)

*All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence.*  
Emily L. Thuma (University of Illinois Press, 2019)

*Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*  
Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Duke University Press, 2016)

*The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*  
Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Duke University Press, 2017)

## LETTER TO THE ANTI-RAPE MOVEMENT

by robin mcduff, deanne pernell, and karen saunders  
of Santa Cruz Women Against Rape (1977)

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

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### a choice?

Many groups claim that they are neutral about reporting a rape to the police; they say they neither push a woman into it, nor tell her she shouldn't report. Their literature and phone counseling is biased toward giving women

