

Session 5: VIOLENCE

This session was a full day session. The main focus for Session Five was to explore the links between interpersonal and institutional violence in our relationships and communities. Our first objective was to deepen our understanding of these linked forms of violence in relation to systemic male supremacy, in the context of multiple and interacting systems of oppression. A second objective was to strengthen our own practice of confronting this violence of male supremacy, whether at the interpersonal or institutional level. As part of this, we also sought to create a space which was supportive of participants' own histories of trauma and violence and, where possible, to connect people with resources which could help them to engage with their histories in a transformative way.

Preparation

As preparation for this session, we asked participants to:

- Continue with a daily centering practice.
- Complete the Commitment Worksheet.
- Meet with another participant from the group to discuss the Commitment Worksheet, and what it felt like to be thinking about and articulating commitments in this way.
- Read "Dangerous Intersections" by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and "Where the revolution started: an introduction" by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, from the zine entitled *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Partner Abuse in Activist Communities*.
- Watch two short videos, both by Aishah Shahidah Simmons, director of *No! The Rape Documentary* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRGESU0CuvI> AND <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKBKPizmgvQ>), paying particular attention to descriptions and depictions of men's sexuality and sexual expectations and entitlement with respect to the women in their lives.

Opening activities

We began the session with an overview of the day's objectives and agenda, and a review of the goals, timeline and working agreements for the study-into-action process as a whole. In order to foster a safer space that could help to hold people's histories and experiences with violence, we emphasized the importance of paying attention to:

- Self-care/collective care
- Confidentiality, including not re-sharing people's contributions without explicit permission from them
- Being intentional around what you are sharing by thinking about what might be triggering for other people to hear, and what will help move the conversation forwards

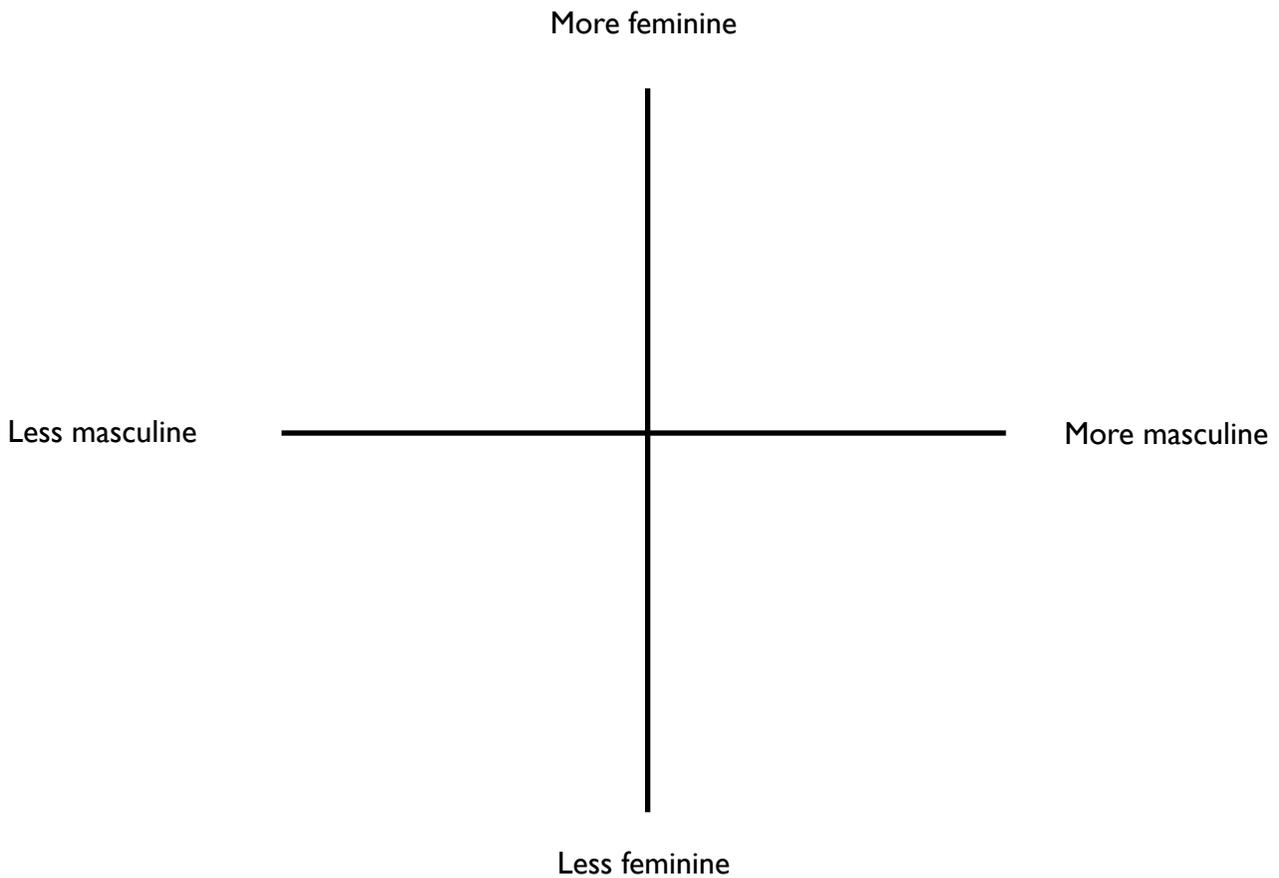
- Making conscious choices about how to participate in terms of what might be triggering for you and how to deal with feeling triggered in ways that both takes care of you and takes care of the group process (e.g. does not become the center of the group process)
- Remembering that there likely will be silences in the room in response to intense issues that are coming up for people

We did a centering practice and a mutual connection practice, focusing on the question “Why is it important for you to be talking about violence?”.

In order to encourage everyone to stay connected to their own experiences of strength and resilience, as a resource on which to draw in confronting their own and others’ histories of violence, we asked participants to stay in their pairs and have each person share a short story about something that gives them resilience.

Gender presentation and violence

To get into the discussion on violence, we began with a short activity (45 mins) focusing on participants’ own experiences of the links between gender presentation and the violence of male supremacy. We marked the following diagram on the floor:



We explained that this represented a spectrum of gender representation, in which feminine and masculine are not simply opposites, as the ideology of the “gender binary” would insist, but rather different and intersecting modes of gender presentation and identification.

We asked participants to stand in the place on the diagram which best described their gender presentation when out on the ‘street’. We asked participants to talk about:

- How is your gender presentation in this setting affected by the fear of violence?
- How is your gender presentation in this setting complicit with the violence of male supremacy?

We then asked participants to stand in the place which best described their gender presentation at ‘home’. If this was different to their gender presentation in the ‘street’, we invited people to talk about the reasons for such difference, as well as to answer the questions again. As some of the participants had pre-existing relationships with each other, we were able to give each other feedback when external perceptions of our gender differed from our internal experience.

Much of the discussion was about the different ways in which we, as men, conform to dominant norms of masculinity, especially in public spaces, and the costs of not conforming. Some participants, including both cis-men and trans-men, talked about the violence they had experienced because of their non-conforming gender presentation. White privilege and class privilege were also named by some participants as being significant in relation to the perceived or experienced threat of violence faced by those who were gender non-conforming in some way. The history of queer and transgender people of color using the piers on the Hudson river in downtown Manhattan as a community space was cited as one example of a response to the everyday racialized transphobia and homophobia that they face.

We ended by summarizing some key issues from the activity:

- Women are targeted by male supremacist violence because they are female
- People are also targeted with this violence because of their non-conforming gender presentation
- As male-identified people, our gender presentation can be complicit with the violence of male supremacy
- The gender presentations of male-identified people are affected by fears of violence, linked not only to male supremacy, but also to white supremacy, homophobia, and transphobia
- Part of the work of challenging male supremacy for male-identified people is to help to expand the spaces in which people do not feel threatened by violence because of their gender presentation

Spectrum of violence

The next activity (90 mins) focused on the spectrum of violence. A key aim of this activity was to make clear that there are many forms of violence, which interact and reinforce each other in people’s lives. These different forms of violence can be seen as

being on a spectrum, from the micro to the macro level, affecting the most intimate parts of our lives and the wellbeing of whole communities. We presented the following key points about the spectrum of violence of male supremacy, that it is:

- Pervasive and routine for women and gender non-conforming people
- Cumulative over time and in different settings (family/relationships, workplace, street)
- Traumatic in terms of long-term impacts on emotional & physical well-being
- Harmful in different ways for different people - we should not assume that some forms of violence (e.g. physical) are necessarily more harmful than others (e.g. emotional)
- Functional in terms of maintaining a system of male supremacy
- Structural, in that it is enacted and enabled by institutional forces (e.g. the prison-industrial complex)

These points generated a very useful discussion. There was push back around not assuming some forms of violence are more harmful than others. We discussed how it is helpful to understand various forms of violence as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, rather than try and rank different forms of violence in terms of being relatively “OK” versus that which is abhorrent. The laws of the criminal-legal system do impose such a ranking, marking some forms of violence as more “serious” than others. Rather than simply accepting such a ranking of different forms of violence, we discussed the importance of paying attention to the harms caused by different forms of violence, an approach that necessarily involves talking and working with those who have been harmed on their own safety and healing priorities, rather than making any assumptions about the harm caused simply on the basis of the violence that was perpetrated.

Having brainstormed with participants some of the different forms of violence on the spectrum, we asked each participant to write for 5 mins on personal experiences in which they have witnessed or committed two or more of the different forms of violence on the spectrum, relating these experiences to the key points that have been presented. We asked participants to get together in pairs to share their writing, and talk about the feelings that came up for them as they recalled these experiences.

Coming back together as a large group, we debriefed the pairs exercise, and then talked about the importance of collective action in addressing the underlying conditions of oppression that produce the violence on the spectrum. We asked each pair to then work with another pair and, taking one of the examples of violence that was discussed by one of the pairs, to:

- Identify some of the specific conditions out of which this violence comes
- Identify possibilities for collective action by male-identified people, in whatever kind of formation, that could begin to address some of these conditions
- Present back on butcher paper to the rest of the group and discuss

We summed up the discussion by highlighting the points made by the groups in relation to the possibilities and opportunities for us, as male-identified people, to be

working collectively to challenge the violence of male supremacy. When we debriefed this activity later as the facilitation team, we felt that we could have done a better job of more clearly explaining what we meant by “collective action,” giving examples of what this does or could look like.

Survivor experiences

After a potluck lunch, we came back together for the first activity (60 mins) of the afternoon, which focused on survivor experiences. Our introduction to this activity emphasized the importance of better understanding survivors’ experiences in order to:

- challenge assumptions about what is and what is not violence
- counter the denial, minimization and silence that still surrounds so much violence
- emotionally connect with our own and other people’s feelings in relation to violence and to counter numbness
- better understand the pervasiveness and systematic nature of violence and the trauma it produces
- better understand violence as lessons in domination - both in terms of learning what it is to dominate and learning what it is to be dominated
- better understand the ways in which violence helps to make relations of power and domination seem normal and natural

We watched three short video clips - the trailer for No! The Rape Documentary (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRGESU0CuvI>), a digital story from the DVD Paths of Transformation: Men’s Digital Stories to End Child Sexual Abuse (see Digital Stories on the CMS website) and a video on trans experience of violence. We then discussed people’s reactions to the videos, and the preparation work they had done before coming to the session, with the following questions:

- In relation to these survivors’ experiences, what makes you feel sad?
- In relation to these survivors’ experiences, what makes you feel angry?
- In relation to these survivors’ experiences, what makes you feel guilty?
- What has shifted for you in terms of your understanding of the violence of male supremacy as a result of these survivors’ experiences?
- Given that we’re all committed to doing more to challenge the violence, what is helping you to feel motivated, hopeful, connected?

This was an emotionally intense activity. Having watched the three video clips, some people were keen to discuss them while other participants just wanted to sit with their feelings and reactions and not have to talk about them or analyze them in any way. When we as the facilitation team later debriefed this activity, we had the following reflections:

- Even though the clips were short, showing three videos back-to-back felt overwhelming - it would have been better to show one video clip, and then have a discussion. One option would have been to show the different video clips at

different points during the day - in this way, we could have raised the issues we wanted to raise without overwhelming people emotionally.

- One of the video clips we used showed an actual incident of violence. This was triggering for a number of the participants. In hindsight it was not a good idea to show a video that had actual violence taking place in it, especially because we hadn't paid enough attention to creating a space to hold people's own experiences as survivors. We agreed during the debrief that the next time we ran a Study-into-Action we would not use any materials that showed any actual violence taking place.
- Showing the digital story last was helpful, because its focus on issues of resilience helped participants to deal with the emotional intensity of the survivor experiences being shared by the video clips.
- Pausing in the middle of the activity to do a Centering practice and then take a straw poll on how to move on with the activity was very helpful in bringing everyone's presence back to the room and the discussion.
- A different approach to the discussion that we could have taken would have been to spend more time talking about our experiences of trying to support survivors, and what we have done and would like to do when someone has disclosed to us harm that has been done to them. We agree that it would also have been good to have a piece about how we support a survivor in a particular moment.
- There was a good deal of silence in the room after we showed the video clips. Holding this silence was an unfamiliar experience for the facilitators involved. On the whole, we felt we did a good job of holding this silence, but that we would have been helped in this task if we had given more time when prepping for the activity beforehand to thinking through questions we could use to help people sit with their emotional reactions. Also, it would have been good to give the group a clearer idea up front about what they were going to see and its emotional intensity, and continue to remind people that they should take care of themselves in any way that they needed to (e.g. should feel free to step out at any point.)
- We talked about other ways that we could have helped the group hold the emotional weight of the activity - e.g. asking people to do some writing on their own or talking in pairs. There was a whole range of feelings happening in the room, and we needed different options or tools to help us hold these emotions together.
- We also noted that the preceding activity had focused on the spectrum of violence, but that all of the videos were about physical violence only. It would have been better to discuss survivor experiences in relation to this spectrum of violence.
- In general, we as the facilitation team agreed that this had been an important activity to do, but that we needed to be very careful with our responsibility to manage the emotional 'safety' of the group. Part of this responsibility is making enough time beforehand, when preparing for the session, to think and talk through how we would deal with the range and intensity of people's emotional reactions.

Sexual coercion and consent

The previous activity brought up a lot of feelings for people, linked to their own experiences of witnessing, suffering and/or perpetrating violence. In order to help participants be with their feelings, we led a short centering practice before moving on to the next activity, which focused on issues and experiences of sexual coercion and consent (60 mins).

In order to explore these issues, we used two written case studies of experiences of sexual coercion to draw out the different forms that this coercion can take, the meanings of “rape culture,” its links to pornography and the violence and exploitation of the sex industry, and what practices of consent, as well as bystander interventions, could look like. After discussing the case studies in small groups, we came back together as a large group to debrief and then brainstorm a range of practices of consent, and what we could do as male-identified people to support and expand the spaces in which these practices of consent could become normalized. The results of this brainstorm can be seen here.

During this discussion there was some push back from some participants about the written case studies we had chosen to use. Some participants felt that the case studies were too un-nuanced in the experiences/scenes of sexual coercion that they portrayed, and that sexual coercion happens in much more subtle ways that these case studies did not get at. On the other hand, there were others in the group who felt that the sexual violence described in the case studies did not reflect the realities of sexual assault in their communities. As a facilitation team, one conclusion that we drew from this range of reactions was that it would have been better to have a greater range of case studies reflecting the different realities of sexual coercion. One way to do this would have been to elicit case studies from participants, either beforehand or during the activity.

There was also some push back that the case studies were very heteronormative; they showed sexual coercion happening in straight, gender-conforming relationships, where it is the man coercing the woman. There was a feeling in the group that, as a group, we needed to have a more complicated conversation about sex and power, and the different ways that people of all genders and sexualities use sex to assert or maintain power or navigate contexts where unequal power relations are marked. The example was given of people sleeping with each other in activist formations in order to gain access to the social capital that comes with being associated with respected or leadership figures in the movement. Clearly, gender is critical in how sex is used and experienced in relation to power, but we also need to talk about class, education, age and how these affect how power plays out in sex. At the same time, as some participants stressed, we also need to come back to the reality that coercive sexual behavior happens more from male identified people against female identified people. We agreed that it was important to continue this conversation, especially in Session Eight on intimacy and desire.

In debriefing this activity later, we as the facilitation team agreed that:

- It would have helped to give a clearer explanation of why these particular case studies were chosen, and that was because they were focused on the complicity of

bystanders in situations of sexual coercion, with the takeaway message being that it is particularly important for us, as men committed to challenging male supremacy, to be challenging this complicity.

- The case studies were a good opportunity to talk about alcohol and other drug use in relation to sex and sexual coercion and consent, and that we had not raised this clearly enough with the group as an area of concern. Thus, we missed an opportunity to have a nuanced conversation about alcohol and other drug use in relation to rape culture and its practices and rituals, especially among young people. It was also a missed opportunity to look at the role that we could play as active bystanders in intervening in a situation where we can see that drinking or drug use is leading to a situation where sexual coercion and violence may be more likely to occur.
- This activity proved to be more challenging and contentious than it might otherwise have been because it came right after the emotional intensity of the “Survivor experiences” activity. There was some feeling on the team that it might have been better to not go ahead with this activity in view of the fact that participants were still dealing with their emotional reactions to the previous activity. There was also a feeling that we could have moved this activity to Session Eight, and included it in the discussion of intimacy and desire.

Staying emotionally connected

As a way to stay with our emotional engagement with the issues being raised, we engaged in the somatic practice (45 mins) of “Grab, Center, Face” to practice being with the feelings that come up for us all when trying to challenge the violence of male supremacy. After de-briefing this somatic practice, we talked about the importance of nurturing our own and each other’s resilience to help us deal with the many challenges of confronting the violence of male supremacy. We invited participants to share some things that they would do in the next week to access their resilience. We also distributed a Handout on Survivor Support and Healing Resources, which listed organizations (mostly based in New York City as well as some national and international) providing a range of support services to people dealing with histories and experiences of many forms of violence.

Closing activities

We then closed the session with a reminder on self-care, the preparation assignments for Session Six and a closing circle, in which everyone was asked to share one learning from the session and one word or phrase to describe how they were feeling at the end of the session.