

ENDING VIOLENCE

Association of BC

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THE ROLE OF ALLIES IN ANTI-VIOLENCE WORK

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In anti-violence work we act in solidarity with shared purposes and shoulder each other up to resist patriarchy and misogyny and create a society that is safer for everyone. Accountable men, including transgender men, work as allies alongside women anti-violence workers to address men's power and to transform a rape culture. But as "women" we are also required to act as allies to each other as we are not all in equal positions of power or risk in relation to this work. In activist cultures an ally is a person who belongs to a group which has particular privileges, and who works alongside people from groups that are oppressed in relation to that privilege. The hope is to create change and increase social justice in relation to this oppression.

Being an ally is not a fixed position, it is fluid, and based on the different domains of our identity and the access to power we hold in relation to that domain. This means that at times, I will be an ally to a person around one domain of power, but they may be an ally to me around a different part of our identities (Crenshaw, 1995). For example, I am required to act as an ally to a woman who identifies as queer because of my access to heterosexual privilege. In another moment, the same woman may be required to be an ally to me around issues of class background, or organizational position. Ally work is fluid, meaning that we need to attend to the power that is present, back each other up and be in solidarity with each other across the differences that divide us (Reynolds, 2010a).

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LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD



EVA BC and CCWS staff were all on hand to share this extraordinary evening when EVA BC Executive Director Tracy Porteous received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth. See page 16.

BE MORE THAN A BYSTANDER

BREAK THE SILENCE
ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In BC every year, there are 60,000 physical or sexual assaults committed against women. Almost all of these assaults are committed by men."

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BE MORE THAN A BYSTANDER

A large gathering was on hand when EVA BC's initiative to break the silence on violence against women was formally launched in July 2011 at the BC Lions training facility in Surrey. See page 12.

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THE ROLE OF ALLIES IN ANTI-VIOLENCE WORK

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When serving in the role of ally it is important that I locate myself in my privilege. When I work with anti-violence workers and women in the impoverished community of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, I find ways to be public about the fact that I have never lived on the street or struggled with substance abuse. I do this because I am sometimes read as someone who has had these experiences, and these misunderstandings invite a trust and sister-feeling that is neither earned nor present. It is important that I do not pass for a woman who has had these experiences, as women may feel more affinity and safety than my privileges warrant. Later, a woman may feel that they have been lied to or that some truth has been withheld from them. I make my privilege known as an act of accountability for my access to power and as a beginning place for trust to grow.¹

Allies choose to be accountable for their power. Our access to power makes us hard to trust, as we can decide to back down, not notice, be silent, minimize, accommodate, or smooth things over. The role of the ally is to make space for the person who is oppressed to be able to step into and be heard, and have their words matter and hold power. As an ally I hold myself, my actions and words, accountable to the person who is oppressed. The ally makes space and then works to get out of the way. A feminist with white skin privilege talking on behalf of women who are racialized risks further marginalizing the woman she seeks to be an ally to. The ally may need to make space and not speak because allies are not qualified to speak. As an ally to a colonized woman I am unqualified to speak because I do not know colonization outside of an academic understanding and teachings from witnessing people's suffering. I did not suffer colonization, I have not paid the price of this knowledge. Being an ally is hard work and not without risk, and especially hard to get "right". But I always remind myself the woman who needs me to be an ally in this moment is the person who is being oppressed by power, and that the risk to me is not the same. Allies

do not carry the burden, and when our actions are unskilled or fail the oppressed person pays the largest consequences (Reynolds, 2010b).

Allies are invited in to speak when oppressed people cannot be heard. At times allies are the best people to speak as the risks of backlash are high and a woman may ask an ally to speak. This is, however, risky and imperfect and requires humility and accountability practices and relationships of enough-trust, as well as practices of not stealing knowledge or appropriating experiences.

As anti-violence workers we can experience our work as very individual, which brings with it continual invitations to division. We are separated from each other as workers and organizations competing for scarce resources in the midst of overwhelming need in a political climate of greed and privileged individualism. Invitations to division abound in our community work, and we can be seduced into judging other workers, their positions, and their professions. In contexts of adversity, the point is not to figure out which anti-violence workers and organizations to blame, but to think of ways to help women and families and change the social contexts that support violence in all its forms. Our greatest resources for doing that are each other. Doing solidarity invites anti-violence workers to be alongside each other because we need each other, and because it doesn't serve woman and families for us to be divided off.

I try to build solidarity in all of the work that I do, whether it be activist, community, counselling, or training work. I hold close my desire to be in solidarity with everyone who picks up anti-violence work. This invites a leaning in towards the other. It reminds me that acting in a way that harms the dignity of another person, especially publicly, is not in line with the ethics I hold. I remind myself in these moments that my aim is not to be right, correct, or seen as smart. My aim is always moving toward solidarity, and so I need to act in a way that makes space for that person and me to be walking alongside each other.

One teaching from anti-oppression work that I hold close is an understanding that there is always more solidarity than we know of.

In Ecofeminism, Indian feminist physicist, Vandana Shiva, and Maria Mies, a German feminist scholar, weave together feminism, activism and environmentalism.² This positioning of environmentalism as activism has had an impact on me, as it helped me begin to draw connections between social movements and see the intersection and solidarity of multiple paths towards global justice. Prior to this learning I had been part of perpetrating the rifts between environmentalists and social justice activists, seeing them as separate, individual and competing projects. This separation ended for me when I worked alongside a survivor of torture from Nigeria, whose activism was environmentalism. After working alongside this activist/environmentalist I could never again entirely separate one from the other. It is fabulous that fifteen years later, this division needs to be explained. This has me wondering in our collective anti-violence work what other divisions and barriers are keeping us from seeing who is in solidarity with us (Reynolds, 2010c).

I remind myself that there are some collective ethics we share or we would not be meeting in this space together. Working to address and resist violence and holding a feminist-informed anti-oppression stance is hard work that requires skill, moral courage, and commitments to justice. I remind myself that no person is in this movement by accident. Our collective ethics have brought us together, however imperfectly.

The collective ethics that I am talking about are those important points of connection that weave us together as anti-violence workers. We do not have to create perfect collective ethics, as points of departure and distinctions in our ethical positioning can offer the gifts of diversity and broader possibilities. In most of our work these collective ethics go unnamed, but they are the basis for the solidarity that brought us together and can hold us together.

Solidarity is not synonymous with unity. America Bracho is a medical doctor who works with Latino Health Access, and describes it as an Institute of Community Participation. Bracho says, "Unity in a community is never going to be generalized. It will

occur only around certain issues. We do not seek to unify the community in any general way. We do however seek to find and build a sense of common ground on particular issues."³ She speaks about the inability even for people in a small village in Mexico to be united on any issue, and the basically racist assumption that Latinos in the United States should be united on most issues. While holding onto a common ground on particular issues and declining unity, workers at Latino Health Access also work purposefully to decline invitations for division. Doing solidarity requires discernment between division and difference. The point is not to achieve unity by smoothing off the edges of all differences, but to find points of connection in relationships that bring forward an "intimacy that does not annihilate difference".⁴

Being allies and working in solidarity does not mean that we are ever hoping to achieve total agreement or that shouldering each other up means always agreeing in our collective anti-violence work. We are required to create a culture of critique in which we can challenge each other and hold our practices and theories up to scrutiny in order to serve our families and communities better. Being allies to each other in anti-violence work requires that we hold each other to account, but we are not acting as allies when judgment and attack are used to silence other anti-violence workers and discredit them. Discerning critique from attack is part of our work as allies. All activists working in anti-oppression frameworks are familiar with the heart wrenching spiritual pain that comes when we replicate oppression.

Our hope in being allies to each other and working in solidarity in anti-violence work is to change the social context of patriarchy, violence, and oppression and not to replicate it with each other.

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¹ A thorough and accessible text on this subject is Anne Bishop's *Becoming an ally: Breaking the cycle of oppression* (1994).

²Shiva & Miles (1993)

³ Bracho (2000), pp. 2.

⁴Palmer (2003), pp. 49.



Vikki is a community activist, instructor and therapeutic supervisor whose experience includes clinical supervision and therapy with refugees and survivors of torture, mental health and substance abuse counsellors, community activists, anti-violence counsellors, and working alongside transgendered and queer communities. She is especially inspired to be involved with Peak House, WAVAW (Woman Against Violence Against Women) and RainCity Housing teams. Vikki's published work addresses social justice, resisting "burnout", supervision, ethics, group work, substance abuse and trauma. She is an Instructor with the Vancouver School for Narrative Therapy, VCC, UBC and City U where she received the Deans' Award for Distinguished Instruction. (www.vikkireynolds.ca)

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or email boyce@endingviolence.org**