

# Community Accountability

<https://commacct.uber.space>

July 2020

## ABOUT

Community Accountability – Taking collective responsibility in response to sexualised violence.

# Table of Content

<b>Community Accountability</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Open Letter</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Naming the perpetrator</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chronology</b>	<b>13</b>
Individual Confrontation	13
Forming a support group	13
Informing the perpetrator's close friends	14
Distributing the letter	15
Open Meetings and Community Group	15
Perpetrator Contact Group	16
Reading Group/Writing Group	17
What next?	18
<b>Group response</b>	<b>19</b>
What factors prevent victims from sharing their experience, asking for support, or leaving the threatening situation they are in?	19
What factors in the social and political context support abusive and exploitative behaviour?	26
Limiting factors	35
Challenging the assumptions that protect perpetrators	40
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>46</b>
A Personal Conclusion	46
Contact Group Conclusion	49
Personal Reflection 1	62
Personal Reflection 2	70
Personal Reflection 3	73
Personal Reflection 4	76
Personal Reflection 5	84
Personal Reflection 6	90
<b>Resources</b>	<b>100</b>

# Community Accountability

2020, eight years ago a person of the left-wing political circles of Birmingham experienced sexualised violence and rape in their relationship. Three years later, they wrote an open letter to inform the Birmingham community about what happened and to ask people to get involved in a community accountability process. This website is the result of a process that tried to reflect on and take responsibility for what happened. We decided to publish these things in order to make them accessible to other groups and people, to invite a debate about how we deal with sexualised violence, and offer some guidelines of what we thought went well or didn't. The aims of this process were:

- ❑ *to empower the person who was raped to speak up,*
- ❑ *to make these events known and talk about sexualised violence without taboo,*
- ❑ *to initiate a process that discusses the structures that allowed this to happen, ways of responding to it and means of preventing it in future*
- ❑ *create a supportive atmosphere for all victims and survivors of sexualised violence and*
- ❑ *to force the perpetrator to take responsibility for what he has done and prevent future abuse.*

This website tries to reflect on and document what we have achieved in response to these aims. We would be happy if you could help us to spread this website and it's message by sharing it in line with these aims.

Navigating through this website: The [Open Letter](#) is the original letter that was written by the victim and their support group to the Birmingham community in 2015, and an update to it following the process. The [Chronology](#) gives an overview over the different steps taken and groups formed during the accountability process. In the [Response](#) section you find the collective reflections and response of the Birmingham community to the Open Letter. As part of the [Conclusions](#) you find personal statements of the victim and other people involved in the process, as well as an evaluation from the group tasked with being in contact with the perpetrator. Finally, the [Resources](#) section provides some further readings and helplines.

## Open Letter

*// The following letter was distributed in printed form to about 50 people in Birmingham in the summer of 2015.*

*// Trigger warning: contains explicit references to sexualised violence*

Open letter from a victim of sexualized violence and her support group

We are writing this open letter to inform you about events of rape and sexual abuse that have taken place in the Birmingham political circles. Our aims with this are:

- ❑ to empower the person who was raped to speak up,
- ❑ to make these events known and talk about sexualized violence without taboo,
- ❑ to initiate a process that discusses the structures that allowed this to happen, ways of responding to it and means of preventing it in future
- ❑ create a supportive atmosphere for all victims and survivors of sexualized violence and
- ❑ to force the perpetrator to take responsibility for what he has done and prevent future abuse.

We are a group of people who became active when the victim decided to share her experience with political and personal friends. This was after a case of sexual violence was made public in the left scene she is now part of and which gave her the confidence to be open about her experience. Together we decided to inform more people about what happened and this letter is the result of a process we have had with a smaller group of people in Birmingham and the perpetrator. Please read this letter, take your time to think about it, share it and discuss its content with other people from the political and social circle, but do not make this letter or its content public online nor share it with people outside the relevant circles or people you do not trust to act according to the aims of this letter. Our interest is a left scene in Birmingham that is able to engage in an emancipatory struggle with society, but also within itself. A general guideline for what we mean by relevant is: everyone who knows the perpetrator or the person he raped, people who are or were involved in the social and/or political circles or people who are interested in working towards the same goals as stated above. We cannot and do not want to decide this on an individual level from afar and hence will leave this up to you. We also want you to protect the privacy of the victim by not identifying her or the

perpetrator publicly. Additionally we would ask you to refrain from putting this letter up on the Internet, as well as talking about the rape or the people involved on facebook.

### ***A brief chronology***

In the beginning of 2012, X, a central character in the Birmingham political circle, raped his then girlfriend and continuously violated her sexual self-determination over a period of several months. He exploited the situation of her being dependent on other people's help after an accident that partly immobilized her at the time. To state clearly how we use the word rape: X ignored her explicit verbal rejection as well as her physical resistance to sex multiple times, while she was doing rehabilitation and when they lived together over the summer. He was confronted with this during the relationship, but the violence and abuse continued over the summer until she moved away from Birmingham in autumn 2012. The violence went unnoticed and unmentioned and part of why we are writing to you is to discuss what circumstances led to this.

### ***Our approach***

To us it is very important that X is not at the centre of the political process. There is a tendency in debates about sexualised violence to focus too much on the question of how to deal with the perpetrator. We think this can distract from looking after those who are directly or indirectly affected by his behaviour and organising support for each other in the process. Instead, we think a process about sexualised violence should take on the perspective of the victim. This means for us to understand that being raped is often an individualised experience of powerlessness. The taboo around the topic further makes it harder to deal with this experience as it suggests that it is something to be ashamed of or something too difficult to deal with. This is why we think encouraging victims to be open about their experience can be very empowering by making it clear that this is not an individual problem, that it is nothing to be ashamed of and that it is something people are willing and able to engage with. Empowering victims to talk about their experience also helps to share the responsibility of finding a response to these acts of violence instead of leaving victims alone in trying to find a way of dealing with it. Taking on the victim's perspective for us also means to recognise that in this case, and also in many other cases, it is the victim who silently retreats from political activity while the perpetrator stays on. We see this as one of the reasons why people are much more concerned about the effect that an open debate will have on the perpetrator,

instead of asking what support can be offered to the victim or other people affected by sexualised violence.

During the past months of the process, many people initially reacted by expressing their fears that there would be a witch hunt against the perpetrator, or that the process would become one of punishing or shaming him. While we share these concerns in general, we also see a problem in addressing them to a victim making her experience of rape public. Firstly, we think it is important to see this letter and the reactions to it as a reaction to the perpetrator's violence and that the situation we have to deal with now has been created by him and not by the person speaking up. Secondly, we think it is extremely important that everyone who gets told about a case of sexualized violence takes responsibility for how they react to this information. The silence of a victim cannot be seen as the condition that people behave reasonably.

We decided to write the letter with an 'X' instead of the perpetrator's name, since we want to protect the victim's as well as the perpetrator's identity from the public sphere, the internet and hostile groups. Nevertheless, we also think that there are good reasons to name and identify a rapist in discussions and want to encourage you to do so. This is not to punish or shame him but because we think that making rape and sexualised violence an unsayable thing is part of the structures that make it impossible for victims to talk about it, seek help, and break out of their situation. What's relevant for victims is also for rapists: as, if they can be relatively sure that their actions can never be talked about publicly, they can feel safe and unquestioned. To change this seems more important to us than to fully protect the perpetrator's identity. It is up to you to use the information about the perpetrator's violence responsibly, so that other victims will feel encouraged to talk about their experience in the future.

While we see the responsibility for the acts of violence to lie with the perpetrator, we think a political process around rape should focus on structures that enable it rather than on the perpetrator as an individual to be punished and/or rehabilitated. For us this means to see his acts of violence not as individual acts but linked to his behaviour more generally and understand them in the context of the political group he and the victim were involved in, and society more broadly. We feel that his central position in the group gave him the chance to remain unchallenged and unquestioned and thereby normalised his abusive behaviour. We see internal hierarchies, authority and dependencies as relevant factors of abusive behaviour both in this case and in political groups more generally; and think there needs to be

a broad discussion that also reaches those people at the “loose ends” of our communities and groups.

From our perspective, X was further able to exploit a culture of keeping the political and the private separate, and one where asking for help and taking care of each other was unusual and hard. It was seen to be a distraction from the political fight of the group and rather being delegated to private relationships. Statements by the perpetrator that sex with his girlfriend boosted his self-esteem or made him “feel more manly” and his suggestions that keeping him well could be her “new role” in the movement after her accident, bring up issues of sexism in our relationships and political organizing.

In the case we are writing about, the victim felt isolated and dependent on the perpetrator due to the long hospitalization, rehabilitation and limited mobility while staying in Birmingham. We decided to tell you this in order to show how other dimensions of oppression, such as ableism, should not be ignored when discussing sexualised violence as well as access and self-determined behaviour in our political and social contexts. However, despite the importance of structural oppression we do not want to encourage the profiling of victims: A victim becomes a victim, because there is a perpetrator.

### ***The perpetrator***

We have included a large section of the letter discussing how we think the perpetrator should be dealt with; however this does not mean that we intend this to be a focus for discussions. Rather we have included this here because we hope that it will answer some of the questions people may have, and so reduce the amount of time that is spent on this topic during meetings.

X was confronted with his behaviour during the relationship, as well as afterwards but he was reluctant to recall his acts of sexualised violence. He further did not seek help to deal with what he had done. He continued to be involved in politics and also entered a new sexual relationship, which increased the isolation and fear of his victim to tell others about her experience. For the past 4 months we have been in contact with the perpetrator via Email to ask him what he understands about his actions and what steps he has taken in order to change. We formulated some demands towards him that we see necessary in order for him to take responsibility for what he has done;

*1. Seek critical help to recall and understand what he has done in order to change*

We believe that taking responsibility for his actions must involve him recalling and understanding his acts of violence. This is why we demanded of him – and provided him with some contact information – to seek competent and critical help to do perpetrator work with him. At the time of writing this, he still claims to not recall his acts of violence. Considering his actions and the verbal and physical resistance of the victim, we think this is very unlikely and otherwise a serious problem.

## *2. Inform any new political environment and sexual partners about his abusive behaviour*

We also believe that a perpetrator has the responsibility to make his past transparent to the people around him. This for us concerns any future sexual partners, but also people he works with politically. This is not to punish him but so that they can – on the basis of that information and his way of dealing with it – decide for themselves in what ways they trust him. As we see his acts of violence not as single events but also linked to abusive tendencies in the way he does politics and further believe that it was his powerful position within political groups that allowed him to get away with it, we think it is important that if he wants to continue doing politics, the people around him are informed. This includes not just the leaders of political groups, but especially those who are not in the center of decisions, in less central and powerful positions.

## *3. Stay accountable to us and a contact group*

We think it is important that X cannot run away from his responsibilities by changing political group, city or friends. For the moment being, we are in contact with him and will continue to do so over the next few months in order to allow the discussions in Birmingham to not focus on this task. In the future, we hope to establish a contact group in England to take over and discuss with him the steps he is taking in response to our demands and beyond. We think this group should be formed by people who are no close friends of X but willing to be part of this process.

Finally, we do not want to take any position or make judgments regarding your personal relationship with X. From our side we don't see the necessity of anyone cutting ties with him politically or personally. However, we do understand that some people will have their own good reasons for this. We also want to make explicit at this point that we respect his current girlfriend's decision to stay in a relationship with him and have also been in contact with her over the past months. While their positions within this political process are of course not unquestionable,

we think that his friends and especially his girlfriend should not be criticized for their relationship with X. We think it is good if people who decide to stay in contact with the perpetrator confront him with his actions and do not spare out the topic. At the same time we ask you, when you talk to X, to always consider that what you hear is only his perspective and to respect the privacy of the person he raped by not allowing him to talk about her, but to focus on him instead.

### ***Ideas for the process in Birmingham***

As we said above, we think a process in Birmingham would ideally not focus on X, but instead take on the perspective of the victim, support the people affected and focus on the structural conditions that allowed this to happen. We wish to see an open, supportive and reflective process about the rape and abuse that took place, about violence-supporting structures and about how they can be overcome. We wish to change the situation in Birmingham such that the victim can feel comfortable to visit Birmingham, talk with others freely about what happened and find support instead of isolation. Beyond this, we also hope that the process around this particular case can help more generally to detect and prevent future patterns of abuse and sexualized violence; and create a culture of awareness and structures of support and empowerment for victims and survivors of sexual abuse, instead of taboo, silence and the expectation to deal with these problems individually instead of collectively.

To achieve these aims, we think it is important to focus on organizing a collective process in Birmingham that does not leave individuals feeling helpless, frustrated or overburdened with finding a response to all of this. Such a process could take on many forms to be sure. As a first step we encourage you to hold a meeting in order to talk through the letter in detail, clarify or raise questions, and agree on further meetings and steps that you want to take.

Regarding the long-term aims of this process, we think there are (at least) three central questions to be discussed in Birmingham;

- 1. What factors in the social and political context support abusive and exploitive behaviour?*
- 2. What factors prevent victims from sharing their experience, asking for support, or leaving the threatening situation they are in?*

### *3. What structures need to be built up in order to prevent future incidents of sexualised violence and to support and empower people who were sexually violated?*

We think it would be very helpful to offer a framework in which people who want to further engage with the topic can do that in order to sustainably raise awareness in the Birmingham political group. In terms of questions of power, violence and dependency structures and how these can be countered collectively. The debate could for example encompass how to create a support group that victims can turn to, what dynamics victims are confronted with when they start talking about their experiences of sexualised violence, how hierarchical structures in the group can be made transparent and eased out, how dependencies can be dealt with collectively, or what could help people to see violence and start asking about it. This is however only a list of topics we came up with without knowing the current situation in Birmingham, so we hope you adjust and add to it from your own perspective and experience. We are aware that this is a very challenging topic for many and want to point out that often it can be useful to get external support (e.g. in form of workshops or training) from people who have more experience with this.

While we ourselves do not wish to become major actors in the process in Birmingham, we would like to be kept updated about what is going on. We would appreciate if you could send us a brief summary of your meeting(s). Our group is going to meet regularly (every 2-3 weeks) until the end of the year and we are happy to answer questions or try to give advice in that time. While after 2015 we might not be able to respond to emails anymore, we will still read them and maybe will write up a summary about how we experienced the reactions. You can contact us via this email address: [against\\_rape@riseup.net](mailto:against_rape@riseup.net). We can also forward private messages to the victim if you indicate this in your email.

## Naming the perpetrator

In the original letter we decided against naming the perpetrator because we feared that people would attack us for naming him and take his side because they would judge it as an act of punishment. Thus, we decided to not name him not only to protect the well-being of the victim, but also because we didn't want a potential controversy around naming him to divert attention away from constituting a community accountability process in Birmingham. Finally, we believed that by informing his social environment, demanding him to inform any future partners and comrades himself as well as establishing a contact group to hold him accountable, we had provided enough information to prevent future abuse.

Now, five years later the attempt to hold him accountable has failed. Whilst we initially believed that despite him moving to London just after some of the people close to him in Birmingham were informed about him having committed sexual violence, there would be enough structures to hold him accountable, this is now not longer the case. Whilst never meaningfully committing to a process of accountability, he has now stopped engaging in any way.

We Have therefore decided to name Edward Bauer so people around him can make informed decisions with regards to him.

### ***How to use the name***

We want to stress that this webpage is created in order to make available resources that show some different ways for people and groups that are affected by the direct and indirect impacts of sexual violence. Sadly, in the course of this and other experiences with perpetrators of sexual violence, we have to recognise that it is very difficult to get commitment from a perpetrator to work towards a stance of accepting the violence they have committed and the harm they have done. We do not want Edd's name to be spread around as gossip in isolation from the perspective that is put forward on this website. We want everyone who knows about the abuse to have read the victim's perspective that is set out in these letters, so if you are sharing this information we ask you to share it together with this website and to encourage a critical engagement with the content and process around the sexual violence he committed and sexual violence in general. We do not demand that people who have a relationship with Edd cut off all contact with him, but we do think the social and political environment around perpetrators have a responsibility to hold them accountable.

We have the following aims for adding Edd's name to this website and we want people to use the information for these reasons.

### ***Prevent future abuse***

Since the perpetrator has not met any of the demands and is unwilling to do so, we have no trust that we can rely on him or his social environment to prevent future abuse. Knowing about the fact that he has raped someone and failed to even recognise – let alone take responsibility for – his acts of violence, we did not want to take any risk that he would do this again to anyone. Surely we will not reach everyone with this website, but it is the most we can do.

We considered leaving this website anonymous and only naming him in emails that we send out to groups and organisations in the left scene. However we feared that we would thereby reproduce informal hierarchies by providing this information to the ‘inner circles’ of the left wing scene and leaving those in the ‘outer circles’ or anyone joining new, in a vulnerable position. We publish his name here to allow as many people as possible to reflect on and make an informed decision about their relationship with him.

### ***Stop the silencing***

Speaking up about sexualised violence is a big part of the battle against this form of abuse. We believe that victims have a right (but not a duty!) to name their abusers and should not face repercussions if they do so.

We also feel that speaking about sexualised violence in an abstract and impersonal way often contributes to making all the cases invisible that happen in our peer-groups and political organisations. In theory many people would agree with a victim centred approach that aims to empower those who have been abused. But we have learned in this process that when it comes to the point where a friend or comrade has committed rape, too many people fail to apply such a feminist perspective and instead often take the perpetrator's side. The reasons for this vary from not wanting to admit this due to a feeling of guilt, to the fear of losing an important friend, to preserving stability and one's own position of power within groups. We hope that naming Edd will help to confront the reality that rapists are not only strangers and to encourage the uncomfortable debates about how we deal with cases of sexualised violence in our own social and political circles.

### ***Demands***

As is set out in the report from the contact group, Edd did not do any of the three demands that were requested of him by the victim (set out in the letter above). In our view these demands are a very small thing to ask of someone who has

perpetrated such an extreme harm, and yet Edd has up till now refused to do any of them. We don't think that people need to cut off contact with Edd, but that anyone who does maintain contact with perpetrators of sexual violence has a responsibility to the victim.

We still think that the demands of the original open letter are all still relevant and that those around Edd can and should make him do them. In the current context we ask those around Edd to make sure that:

*1. Edd goes to a perpetrator programme - the demand from the original letter is still valid and Edd should attend a perpetrator group. This was discussed with Edd extensively and a suitable programme was identified. However, Edd refused because he felt he was somehow different to the other men in the programme.*

*2. Edd takes responsibility for what he has done - this means to hold up the victim's perspective and to challenge him on what he has done. Throughout the contact with Edd he never took responsibility for his actions but always portrayed himself as a victim of his circumstances [add link to contact group report]. Until perpetrators recognise their choice and responsibility for their actions they cannot truly change.*

*3. We still think that Edd has a responsibility to inform his sexual partners and his political environment about what he has done by providing them with the information from and a link to this website. This website will not reach everyone and people have a right to make an informed decision about how they relate to him.*

*4. Edd stays accountable to the victim or their representatives if required. The contact group will no longer be working, however Edd still has an ongoing responsibility to reply to contact from the victim or their representatives in the future.*

**We further want to stress at this point that any victim has the right to protect their identity and want you to support their will of remaining anonymous.**

# Chronology

## Individual Confrontation

I had confronted my then boyfriend with his abusive behaviour during and after our relationship. I asked him to send me a letter in which he would admit what he did and apologise for it. I wanted him to realise what he had done and I hoped that this was a way for him to change and for me to forgive. It took him 2 years to do this and when I received his letter in 2014 I realised that he had written it solely out of the fear of facing consequences and that it was no expression of taking either me or his behaviour seriously.

The open letter of a victim/survivor of sexualised violence to the left scene of Berlin then gave me a new perspective on how I could deal with this not on my own, but collectively. It was crucial that one comrade and friend offered his support to me without me having to ask, which I probably would have never done.

## Forming a support group

In December 2014 a support group was set up in Berlin with two comrades of the victim's political organisation (iL) and two of their flatmates. The aim of this support group was to discuss strategies and take collective responsibility for our actions, such as the publishing of the letter and all of the emails we sent, including those to the perpetrator. By doing this, we attempted to take responsibility from the shoulders of the victim into a collective process.

We started pretty fast, building on the work already done by the victim and one supporter. In our first meeting, we discussed issues of confidentiality, language we wanted to use, aims and mode of our collaboration. Thus, we had not just established the group, but already sketched an agenda. Afterwards, the group members met without the victim in order to talk about expectations, commitment and availability before we started to work. At least one bilateral meeting was held to sort out conflicting perspectives between support group members.

In a next step, the victim shared their experiences concerning the rape incidents, their relationship with the perpetrator, their social and political context and their

efforts of holding the perpetrator accountable. Soon after that we informed two allies from Birmingham and discussed our agenda with them. From now on, the support group, including the victim, met once or twice a month, if needed, more often.

It is usually recommended to split the tasks of the support and the group doing perpetrator work. However, since we were in a different city and none of the people knew the perpetrator, we felt to have enough distance to him to do both. We further wanted to make sure the process did not focus on the perpetrator to not divert attention away from organising a community accountability process in Birmingham.

We kept meeting until a perpetrator contact group was established in Birmingham at the beginning of 2016.

## Informing the perpetrator's close friends

In the support group we decided to inform the people closest to the perpetrator, including his partner, at an early stage in the process and assured them that no more people would be informed until a certain date. This was because we wanted to give them time without public pressure to process the information and find emotional/material support if needed. However, this selection of people, the openness about the next steps of the accountability process and the geographical distance between us supported the creation of a group trying to prevent more people from being told.

While this need not be the case, in retrospect, it could have been anticipated that those people closest to the perpetrator would have the biggest fears about the negative impact a publication of the letter would have on their personal lives and political credibility. Instead of empathising with the victim, they started to portray themselves as victims of this process and shifted the blame from the perpetrator to the victim for disrupting their lives. The accusations and doubts formulated by these people to delegitimise the process were extremely harmful and if we were to do this again, we would pay more attention to inform people first who we think will be supportive.

## Distributing the letter

Because so many concerns had been raised about a possible “witch hunt” (sadly, yes), we, the support group in Berlin, decided to keep the open letter off the internet and only distribute it in printed form. This was extremely time consuming and it was clear that we needed people in Birmingham to do this. Unfortunately, only two out of the nine people who had been given the open letter, were willing to shoulder this task. More people joined at this point, but still the work rested on very few people, which is another reason why it would have been important to include more supportive people earlier on in the process.

## Open Meetings and Community Group

With the distribution of the open letter people were invited to an initial open meeting in Birmingham. Everyone was allowed to come and there was no specific agenda; factual questions were answered, issues raised that people found relevant to discuss and next steps were agreed on. Since both the victim and the perpetrator had moved to different cities, the work supporting the victim from Birmingham was limited to what could be called a theoretical role because the need to provide immediate emotional support for the victim was not necessary. Our contribution as ‘community process group’ in Birmingham to their welfare was instead bound up in creating an environment in which they could be satisfied that their story was believed and that the incidences were taken seriously by the community. In order to create this environment, we decided to meet regularly to discuss the history of our student group and how its structures had facilitated sexual violence. And with the continuing relationship to the affected person, many felt like achieving this trust was something worth celebrating.

In efforts to limit the formation of informal hierarchies, the meetings were organised in the following way: A coordination group was set up only to coordinate the email and ensure the bi-monthly meetings were well advertised, agendas were sent out at least 4 days in advance, allowing for any amendments and additions to the existing agenda, and minutes were sent to all on the email list, as well as the victim and their support group straight after the meeting. This group consisted of 5 volunteers and was meant to rotate every six months. An agenda group was formed after each meeting and had the task of meeting up to set agendas and questions for discussions at the next meeting. This rotating agenda group allowed members to autonomously decide what they wanted to discuss. Each meeting also had a

wellbeing go-around at the beginning and end of each meeting. It was decided to incorporate discussions around the mental health of the members into the meeting rather than have separate well-being meetings as many saw the separation arbitrary and there were fears that separate wellbeing meetings would not carry as much importance/value to members and reproduce a division of labour in this process.

After initial discussions, we decided to draw up a list of questions which we aimed to tease out factors that contributed to the incidents. These meetings went on over the course of around three years with some spells of inactivity and stagnation and were attended by approximately 10-15 people. People often were confused about or disagreed on what we should be doing going forward, how far we should be focusing on perpetrator work and how far the contact group should be feeding back to us, for example. However, many stated that these discussions had made them think about their own behaviour as well as providing a space to share experiences of rape and abuse.

## Perpetrator Contact Group

In December 2015, out of the Birmingham community process group we constituted a perpetrator contact group. The victim and their support group were handing over this task and had written a document about the aims, principles and tasks they saw for this group.\* Five people living in different cities joined this group and have worked in changing composition since then to hold the perpetrator accountable according to the demands formulated in the open letter. At this point, five years later, he hasn't done any of these demands.

First, we asked him to seek critical help to recall and understand what he has done in order to change. However, he refused to do perpetrator work and never provided us with reflections on his behaviour. In the conversations we had he implied that his circumstances were to blame for his behaviour instead of taking responsibility for it himself. He never wanted to talk to anyone who took on the victim's perspective but only to people who he thought would empathise with his perspective. Second, we wanted him to inform any new political environment and sexual partners with the open letter about his abusive behaviour in order to prevent future abuse. We don't know if this has taken place at all, since he never informed us about this. However, we know that he continued to do organizing without informing the people he worked with. We tried to work with him on that,

but communication was very poor and we felt he was playing for time. Third, we wanted him to stay accountable but often he didn't reply to emails for extended periods of time for over a year or attend scheduled meetings.

Concluding, we thus have to state that he has failed to do any of the three demands and with that has been supported by a network of people legitimising this behaviour. The contact group traveled to London to inform and meet comrades and friends of his and to include them in the process. We still believe that he needs to do these demands and that his surroundings have a responsibility to hold him accountable. However, as part of the work in the perpetrator group it was important to realise that one could not force someone to change, particularly if they have no motivation themselves and when they are well supported by people and structures that operate on a basis of rape apologism. Ultimately, while we still believe in transformative justice as a possible alternative to state repression, we have to acknowledge that our powers are limited. We as a contact group can only put demands to the perpetrator, offer the victim's perspective and act on it ourselves, the group could not force the perpetrator to do anything and should not take responsibility for his actions.

\*The following document had been written by the support group to the newly formed perpetrator contact group in 2016. It describes the support group's perspective on the aims and principles of the contact group at the time. Many more emails have been exchanged since then but we felt it might be a useful document for future discussions. Perpetrator\_Contact\_Group

## Reading Group/Writing Group

After a couple of open meetings in Birmingham, some people decided that they wanted to progress by meeting among those who agreed with the principle aims of the letter. Two groups were formed; a reading group and a writing group. The reading group was set up as many felt out of their depth, creating a space for mutual learning and consciousness raising. Another attempt for consciousness raising concentrated on examining masculinity from a critical perspective and was far less successful. Following a relatively well-attended public event concentrating on the role of the military in constructing damaging forms of masculinity there was an attempt to begin a reading group which would focus on critically examining masculinity more generally. However, these meetings were very poorly attended

and stopped after a few attempts. Some of the reasons for this are discussed in the section 'Reflections – Limiting Factors'.

Furthermore, we made the decision to begin thinking about functioning in an open facing way so that the left could benefit from what we believe are some of the useful conversations we have been having to help ourselves deal with what happened in our circles. We therefore also constituted a writing group to work on a publication of our experiences and reflections, the outcome of which is this website. Publishing this website has taken a lot longer than we had planned and the process was stuck somewhere between very high expectations towards ourselves and having other commitments as well. Further, many of us agreed that accountability couldn't simply end at a certain defined point but were unsure how we, as a group with limited capacity who were increasingly spreading out over the country, could continue to meaningfully engage in it. This is why we agreed to find a collective closing point for at least a chapter in this accountability process by publishing this website. Those who were part of this process, but stopped for different reasons, were invited to write personal statements.

## What next?

Closing and evaluating the accountability process that took place in Birmingham doesn't mean we stop talking or thinking about it. But it means we stop working in the groups that have formed. Some of us may continue this work in other contexts, such as Plan C or the interventionist Left and other extra-parliamentary left wing groups, campaigns, smaller base unions and other forms of organising. But most of all we hope that others will feel encouraged by our experiences to debate and practice what we see as an essential anti-sexist agenda of left-wing politics. It may be hard to imagine a world without sexualised violence but in a world where victims would know that they would be listened to, believed and supported once they decide to speak about what happened to them, the perpetrators would lose a lot of their powers that partially made the violence possible in the first place.

## Group response

*The group working on this article was formed from a 'process' or 'community' group who have been working collectively to address the issues laid out in the open letter. We began meeting once every two weeks beginning in September 2015 and have been meeting for about two years to work through these as a group. Later in the process we made the decision to begin thinking about functioning in an open facing way so that the left could benefit from what we believe are some of the useful conversations we have been having to help ourselves deal with what happened in our circles. We think this article, which won't be all encompassing, could be one contribution to the much needed discourse on sexual violence on the left.*

*What follows are our responses to the three questions which are outlined in the original letter which was distributed to us. These provided a focus for our discussions. It was to the benefit of the process that the original questions posed to us by the support group provided such a good lens for exploring the issue of sexual violence. As such, the clarity of these questions made our task relatively simple and straightforward.*

### What factors prevent victims from sharing their experience, asking for support, or leaving the threatening situation they are in?

This question is asked over and over. A large degree of blame goes onto the victims of ongoing domestic and sexual violence. If only you had acted differently you could have prevented being targeted. Yet, we know, for most victims of abuse there are very material reasons why they don't and, at times, simply cannot leave. There is a fear of not being believed or taken seriously, even by close friends. The worry of having their experiences misrepresented by others; feeling a loss of control over those experiences, which can exacerbate those feelings of loss of control and autonomy due to rape and/or sexual violence and prevent victims from 'rocking the boat'.

#### **Why don't victims leave, then?**

Part of the reason why victims may not leave an abusive relationship is often because they don't even recognise it. What society has historically projected as

acceptable from the Victorian era when women were the property of their husbands through to Trump's unsavory but permissible 'pussy grabbing', have generated a veneer around the issue of abuse, which can shape a victim's experiences and perceptions.

Abuse can often be cloaked as love and internalised by the victim as care and protection. This inability to recognise what's going on presents a real problem for survivors speaking out about their experiences: how are victims supposed to be able to define their experiences when fed myths which are unquestioned by larger society? The experience of the archetypal housewife and of marital rape is a key example that illustrates this point. A powerful man or breadwinner shapes the life choices of a woman and instances of normalised aggression and abuse persist where a survivor may suspect that something is wrong, something that makes her miserable, but due to her inability to define it, alongside a gradual erosion of self-confidence, the situation remains unchanged.

We identified through discussion that a key factor in our case was isolation. As we have established in the previous section the group itself did not take on care, social reproductive and emotional labour tasks equitably nor did it prioritise them or take a formal approach to them. Feeling socially isolated, then, and unable to rely on care from other sources meant that it was difficult for the victim to leave the situation they found themselves in. Social isolation does not always look like not any having friends or comrades. Sometimes it is being unable to have the confidence to approach them, particularly if your perpetrator is also their friend. In political groups where a perpetrator is in a position of leadership, an affected comrade may keep silent about their experiences of rape/abuse for fear of causing friction and consequent fractures in the organisation. In such instances, 'Politics' with a capital P, so to speak, takes precedence over inter-personal politics or a politics of care. In some groups there can be a perception created that raising issues of sexual violence is an inconvenience to the goals of the organisation and therefore victims could feel less confident raising cases of abuse where the effect might be a derailment of a group's activity, or they might be encouraged by the atmosphere to view the abuse they have faced as a private problem between individuals. This is heightened when the perpetrator is seen as central to the 'movement' because the fear that many would abandon the political movement, or try to silence the victim in hopes to "keep the political group together" are factors which complicate this decision. Furthermore, victims of abuse can suffer a sense of having their perceived social status debunked if they project themselves as strong.

As discussed in the previous section, the group dynamics can have a significant effect on the victim's capacity to escape a situation. When someone's friendship group and political group overlap substantially there is a high risk of social ostracisation or, at the very least, upheaval. This can be particularly acute when one relies upon friendship bonds rather than traditional familial bonds for immediate support. The threat of abandonment by one's social group becomes far stronger when other options for support are not available. The sense of isolation can be exacerbated when previously held bonds of trust are compromised.

Emotional bonds to the perpetrator are not often discussed in these situations yet they can also be a significant factor. Being in a relationship or even a close friendship with someone over a period of time causes the pair to bond, even if those bonds are ultimately unhealthy and one-sided. Victims often profess to love their perpetrator, to feel strong affection towards them despite the hurt they are causing. This affection can make it difficult for the victim to recognise the abuse in the first place and often causes them to minimise or excuse it in order to maintain the illusion that their love is reciprocated (I call it an illusion because an abusive person cannot be loving to their partner whilst behaving in an abusive way). This is, of course, a deeply personal barrier which can only be overcome by the victim themselves ultimately. However, the importance of outside input in their relationship in this case becomes vital if they are ever to be able to recognise the reality of the abuse.

### ***Why don't victims ask for support?***

Under the Tory government, 34 women's refuges were shut down due to austerity and cuts to support services. This resulted in 2 out of 3 women being turned away from refuges. (Source: Sisters Uncut) The impression of an uncaring society without adequate resources to help vulnerable people can increase the chances of women not asking for support. The professionalisation and consequential bureaucratisation of these services designed to support victims of domestic violence often exacerbates the problem. As such, a victim may not ask for support on the assumption that they will receive inadequate care from untrained employees in the sector. Equally, employees who see a problem may not offer support because they have not been trained and as a result doubt their ability to offer it.

Another real fear of disclosure to social services can be attributed to how they operate in discord with a victim's desires or expectations. For example, women who are the guardians and carers of children and find themselves trapped in an abusive relationship risk having their children taken away. It could lead mothers or carers

to worry that they will take the brunt of the blame and punishment of accusations of child abuse and neglect.

Beyond the context of just the relationship, there is the matter of resources. Many victims live with their perpetrator(s) and cannot risk homelessness, particularly where children are involved. The UK's social housing system has been all but decimated and becoming a part of the homeless system is deeply bureaucratic and alienating. Many face months, even years in temporary accommodation; Travelodge after Travelodge whilst the council makes up reasons not to house them. Leaving children behind is seen to signal lack of care and can hurt child custody cases. The children themselves, too, may be used as a weapon to control the actions of the victim. Another matter is financial – this can work both ways. Either, a victim is reliant upon a perpetrator for money, or else, the perpetrator is a sponge upon their financial means and uses this as a form of control. For some, immigration status is a factor as the state organises and prioritises those in relationships or married to British citizens for legal status and leave to remain. Additionally, those with no recourse to public funds are often entirely at their perpetrators' mercy for survival. For disabled people these problems are tenfold, and then there comes the question of care and the propensity to see partners as de facto carers, preventing autonomy systematically.

These are some of the more structural and material reasons for someone to be unable or unwilling to leave an abusive situation but there are many more complex, psychological ways in which people are manipulated into staying in abusive situations. These may be more difficult to understand, yet, they are undeniably powerful. Abusers tend to undermine their victim's sense of self, their confidence and thus their ability to assert themselves over time. They tend to create a co-dependence however they can, whether that is through resources, emotional support, care (which can be withdrawn without notice) or isolation.

What structures need to be built up in order to prevent future incidents of sexualised violence and to support and empower people who were sexually violated?

In terms of the practice of those involved in the process, the main way in which the learning could reasonably be implemented on a wider level is through the political organisations we went on to be involved in. This includes extra-parliamentary left wing groups, campaigns, smaller base unions and other forms of organising. In many ways it is simpler to adopt and influence policies within democratic and left-oriented organisations which are relatively small rather than within larger structures such as larger trade unions, the university itself, workplace, Labour

Party etc. where there is less political unity and commitment to non-state-led interventions into sexual violence. This is partially due to less legal constraints but is also an issue of the politics of these institutions.

There's a case to be made for campaigns regarding changing current state practice around sexualised violence and abuse or changing institutional practice around these issues. These efforts are not without merit and would certainly have a positive effect on the immediate lives of survivors. However, they are limited in scope by the myriad of other societal factors which contribute to sexualised violence and abuse discussed in this article. There would need to be an overall societal shift, an overthrow of the current political regime, for there to be any meaningful progress on this level beyond simple reformism of a broken institution. This, of course, is what we are more generally fighting for.

For some of us we believe this can and should begin within our own spheres of influence i.e. the political organisations in which we are able to make democratic contributions and shift the culture on a smaller scale. They are, of course, also subject to the overall negative effects and barriers of wider society but there is also more capacity for autonomous action and implementation of a more experimental and liberatory process which may not rely on things like incarceration, corrupt legal systems and other disciplinary forces which do not center a restorative approach or focus on survivors wishes (and, in fact, often worsen the experiences of survivors).

This is a somewhat idealised view – in practice there are always mixed results. Some of us have used our experiences in this particular accountability process to bring thoughts to a wider discussion of accountability in left organisations. Within our own organisations we have played a role in influencing how other situations were dealt with based on what we found in this process. We have been keen to start a debate in our organisations about what should happen when our members or those we come into contact with politically are harmed in some way by others in or outside of our organisation.

Part of the issue we had was indeed that our group was not a membership organisation and functioned on a voluntary basis. For these types of groups or campaigns it becomes more difficult to develop a predetermined process for how to deal with issues of abuse. The structure is overall less rigid, the group itself often in flux as to who is and is not involved with membership becomes less formal and more based on social ties. It is, however, not impossible for an unconstituted group or non-membership organisation to have some sort of processes in place should

they have a mind to create them. It requires certain members to commit to their implementation in a more solid way and an ongoing discussion with people in the group to make them aware of the processes that have previously been agreed. It would require the group to be committed to the idea of community accountability within their group despite its relative informality or seemingly singular focus. This could be challenging for very focused campaigns, as we found, due to it not seeming an obvious thing to implement and have in place especially for those with less experience in organising.

In terms of membership organisations, there are often some differences depending on whether or not the people involved in each scenario were members or non-members of the organisation as this can affect ability to hold certain people accountable or for survivors to seek help from us in the first place. A survivor or victim outside of the organisation should, theoretically, be able to seek help from those within it if they are harmed by a member of said organisation. In these cases it is more likely to go ahead if the person in question is aware that some sort of structure existing within the organisation which is designed to help them and also to be impartial i.e. not biased in favour of their own members. The organisation must project, somehow, an outward facing image of this process in some respect – that is, non-members should know that it exists and how to access it.

In this case there is scope for the organisation to take some level of ‘disciplinary’ or punitive measure against their own member or place conditions upon their membership which are contingent on their engagement with an accountability process. The organisation may also decide to expel that member on the basis of the survivor’s wishes. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach depending on how committed and involved the member is or was. If the member was not very engaged with the organisation then expulsion or conditional membership will have little impact. They may also decide to leave the organisation voluntarily to avoid dealing with the accusations.

Some groups have used the tactic of asking the person accused of abuse not to attend certain events or meetings that they know the survivor will be attending. They are asked to avoid the survivor to ensure their continued engagement in the political scene whilst limiting their own. In some ways this is a practical step towards enabling survivors to feel comfortable continuing to participate in politics, although needs a level of engagement and good will to be effective – or else, a number of people with a will to enforce the ban. On a long-term basis this can be

difficult to maintain and should therefore be seen as a fairly temporary measure pending some sort of resolution or process.

## What factors in the social and political context support abusive and exploitive behaviour?

When considering the factors which contribute to the reproduction of abusive and exploitive behaviour we are confronted with a near staggering complexity. As such, we have broken up our reasoning in terms of macro-scale, middle-scale and micro-scale factors.

### **Macro scale**

Concerning society, we are confronted by the organised subjugation of the state which seeks to maintain our narrow existence as labour in the service of capital. Its politics are a politics of market police, reproduced in law and its necessary violence. Our social reproduction as people is thus denied its full expression, reduced instead to the reproduction of capital on a global scale. Our existence as labour thus limits what is recognised as legitimate and worthy of compensation. Much of our social reproduction falls beyond these narrow limits, and is thus left to us in our time outside of work and politics, drawing on our residual energies to perform. In this way, our lives are cleaved in two between the public realm of capital and the state, and the private realm of non-labour. This divide is gendered and is racialised, determined by the needs of a system which profits from the invisibilisation of this divide, and which is reproduced in everyday forms of violence and silencing. Hegemonic ideologies of gender, of sexuality, of right and wrong, of the entrepreneurial self, serve to reduce the innumerable complexities of earthly existence into something controllable and eminently manageable.

Heide Gerstenberger summarises this well in saying “The open violence of former times has been replaced by the silent force of market conditions. *Once material conditions have forced men, women, and even children to offer their capacity to labor on the market, direct violence is no longer necessary to establish exploitation, because this result is achieved by the impersonal functioning of competition on the labor market. And it is this impersonal power which ensures the acceptance of dominance that is inherent in every capitalist labor relation. This capitalist form of violence, no longer in the open and no longer sporadic, has become the central element of the everyday life of capitalism.*”<sup>1</sup>

In agreement of the often silent, often unchallenged interpersonal violence that is facilitated by capitalist social relations, what has this to do with violence that assumes a specifically sexual form? In so much as men have historically, institutionally and socially harnessed power over women, sex as a dominating

substance of human experience has been both weaponised and abused, and notable feminists have acceded that sex constitutes a base from which men have leveraged social control over women. While instrumentalisation in patriarchal gender relations therefore precedes capitalist violence, it is crucial for our purpose that we understand the character of sexual violence, or rather the sexual character of violence, in societies historically specific to late capitalism.

That we experience a normalisation of violence in everyday life is one such factor. Cultures that normalise abuse tend to silence the affected and in some cases applaud the perpetrator or “let them off the hook”, key tenets of a patriarchal administered society. Laws written by men, for men, seek to protect the power of the perpetrator. Historically this had been upheld explicitly in terms of property, a woman as a man’s private possession. Once this property-relation has been normalised by state institutions, implemented through policy and embodied through the interactions and discourses of everyday life, exploitation and abuse assume naturalised forms, albeit in the guise of exchange, work, even love. To be objectified under such conditions amounts to a more insidious encroachment upon one’s autonomy than an act of premeditated and calculated instrumentalisation, simply because it has crept into the fabric of capitalist social relations. An unspoken hierarchy of violence becomes established, in which aggressive or manipulative behaviours are gendered or otherwise pathologised, rendered exclusively the responsibility of the individual, a depoliticised, ahistorical subject.

Cultural expectations add another layer to the surrounding silence that prevents those who have experienced sexual violence from being able to define and recognise their experiences of violation, or in cases that they do, from having their experiences validated by others. The violence inflicted on the level of society, reinforced by policies and political manoeuvring implicitly validates and normalises abusive and exploitative behaviour. Real social change being slow and wrought with pain, the struggle is waged between material and symbolic resistance against a condition inherited through generations of violence.

### ***The Left is no exception***

There seems to be a common misconception that Leftist activist groups are places of belonging, alternatives to the family, the workplace and other social institutions. They are likened to places of safety, trust and loyalty where through an assumed understanding of shared political beliefs, one can find some solace. One might even call them “communities” – but what kind of community is this? United around this sense of community, political comrades become friends and lovers; relationships

develop. To a large extent this is to be expected. But it is problematic to ignore the subsequent implications to power dynamics, leadership and –always potentially– violence. In these established groups, a perpetrator is often facilitated by a social network that endorses, silences or refuses to confront a problem as serious as sexual violence within their spaces. At the same time, as the globalisation of capital requires people to move around, communities dissipate. One implication for perpetrators of violence is that they have a relatively easy escape-route, away from the community, away from responsibility. More so, a community does not necessarily equal a support network for vulnerable or powerless members; there is nothing inherently supportive in the materialisation of a community. Oppressive structures are formed in the Left and priorities are executed depending on how decisions are made and who rises to an assumed position of leadership.

### ***Middle-scale – The University and the Student Movement***

Within this broader context, it is also essential to examine our position within Higher Education and the student movement for free education. Universities are sites for the performance of academic labour, which is by and large performed in a solitary fashion. The ideology of the entrepreneurial self permeates the university, meaning that one's success or failure is borne individually.. The student, therefore, is engaged in predominantly solitary forms of work throughout their time at university, exemplified by their individual grades and degree qualification at the end of the course. Thus, academic labour is institutionally solitary. Yet, the contemporary university does offer forms of sociality, often mediated through the Student Union and student societies. These institutional forms of sociality are often the only option open to students outside of their immediate living situation for socialising with other students on the basis of common interests. However, such societies are purely voluntary, meaning that an institutionalised separation between the solitary nature of academic work and the sociality of student societies is maintained throughout the 'student experience'. Thus, university life is divided between the solitary experience of gaining a degree, where all liability is held by the individual; and the purely voluntary forms of social interaction which may or may not be available to individual students.

This can result in the clear trade-off between a healthy social life and a successful completion of a degree programme, with the former often being abandoned in favour of the latter. This is related to the social necessity of academic labour – one has, afterall, taken on significant individual debt in order to access higher education so as to gain a degree. No such necessity undergirds sociality within student societies, meaning that the student experience is definitively secondary to

considerations of individual success within a degree programme. Therefore, social isolation is a very real threat confronting many students within universities, especially for those who struggle, for whatever reason, to engage with the legitimate institutional expressions of sociality – the student union and its attendant student societies.

The student movement for free education which sprung up on campuses in response to government proposals to increase tuition fees emerged within this division. In many ways, the political groupings on campuses provided alternate means of sociality, this time organised around a concrete campaign relating to the well-being of students and the prospects for education in general. The student movement, therefore, had its own responses to the division of academic labour and sanctioned forms of sociality – these groups became, themselves, communities or sub-groups within a campus culture. Free education groups became, for many of us, the principal means of doing political work *and* socialising. These groups thus blurred the lines between the personal and the political, and not always in positive ways.

The free education movement was itself stratified. It existed at the official institutional level (National Union of Students), the national coordinating level (National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts) and local/regional groups (Defend Education groups, etc.). At the lowest, most immediate campus level the groups which composed NCAFC were unofficial, non-sanctioned and non-institutionalised groups pursued by university and state authorities due to their propensity to perform occupations and demonstrations in direct opposition to leadership at the student union and university-wide levels. This outsider status for such groups, and the fact that they were often condemned or directly attacked by the authorities, tended to make them intensely inward. Lacking formal structures, intense bonds of trust were formed between free education activists within these groups, in spite of significant political and ideological differences. As such, these groups tended to manifest significant in-groups which formed the core of much free education activism on campuses. As such, free education groups had to tackle the solitude of academic life in the university, the narrowness of peoples' social lives and the lines of legitimacy/illegitimacy drawn and maintained by the state and its agencies. These groups mediated these problems by becoming quite intensely social as well as political entities. People socialised with comrades, often exclusively. Thus, social and political boundaries tended to blur into one, allowing politics to be mobilised for social reasons and vice versa. The horizontalist and relatively informal means of organising further facilitated this blurring.

Horizontalism, the idea that there is no leadership or hierarchy within an organisation but a series of networked roles and responsibilities, tended to fit the free education movement quite well. Given the focus on a single issue – education and tuition fees – political differences were sidelined. Unity around the issue of free education is all that mattered, meaning that such groups were often patch-work in their political composition.

As a result of the commitment to the abolition of tuition fees as a demand and the horizontalist mode of organising there was little opportunity for a coherent critique of political and social relations beyond the universities to emerge during this era of the student movement. Indeed, this focus meant that developing any kind of community perspective on the interpersonal dimension (i.e. on the interaction between individuals and small groups) was sidelined and reduced to the issues of formality/informality and hierarchy. The result of this was that critique of abusive practices, either generally or in particular relationship to patriarchy and sexual violence, was not developed enough in theory or materialised enough in practice. Indeed, it is impossible for us to know how many cases of sexual violence took place over the years within the student movement or the broader communities which emerged from this movement. Some of the reasons for this are outlined in the section of this article called ‘What factors prevent victims from sharing their experience, asking for support, or leaving the threatening situation they are in?’ At the institutional level of the universities however we do have some research on the prevalence of sexual violence. For example, the Hidden Marks report published in 2010 by the NUS found that 68% of respondents had experienced either verbal or physical sexual harassment and 14% had experienced sexual assault. Under reporting of cases of sexual violence means that it is certain that these figures do not accurately represent either the full extent of the problem nor the degree to which sexual violence is normalised at universities in Britain.

The reduction of the politics of the interpersonal to questions of formality/informality and hierarchy, and the focus on abolishing tuition fees education as a demand meant that the free education groups failed to develop a critical perspective on the kind of instrumental rationality which can develop within social movements, particular those where bureaucratic procedures and intense in-group/out-group distinctions are unavoidable. Indeed, the lack of reflection found its accompaniment in the perceived need to constantly organise campaigns and protest actions. This need was shaped by the relatively short-term duration of university courses and consequent high turnover of activists. As such activity within the groups was almost constant, with particularly high levels of

activity around student union elections. The outcome for the free education movement was that individuals were considered one-dimensionally in instrumental terms, terms in which people were valued in relation to how useful they were for furthering the goals of the movement. This went for both those who were in key organising positions as well as those who were considered to be foot soldiers in the fight for free education.

### **Micro level**

Sexual violence or sexualised violence is at once a deeply personal yet also depressingly ubiquitous experience. We have discussed above the structural and contextual factors for this particular case which sparked this process and, indeed, this article but we must also understand what happened as specific to our own lives, friendships, alliances and group. The inter-personal dynamics of the group played its role in what happened but were thus, in turn, created and influenced by the wider context of patriarchy, disableism, rape culture etc. but also, as described, the student movement in the UK within a specific time period.

Yet, how our group functioned was unique in some ways. It had to be, for it was comprised of a set of individual actors who constituted its actions and culture. For many of our early meetings we discussed and attempted to analyse the actions of the perpetrator as an individual, perhaps to our own detriment – for understanding these actions without the person in question is an almost impossible task. Instead, then, we looked to the actions of the group itself and how we organised work, socialising and relationships. We found the question of who does social reproductive and emotional labour to be an important factor in how we understood the group to have functioned. Related to this, the question of care and how we cared or, in some cases, did not care for one another, was recurrent.

A group without formal hierarchies, as already discussed, is one in which informal hierarchies will inevitably develop. Our group was no different. Those with charisma, those with a high commitment to political campaigns, those with so-called social capital were able to become de facto leaders within the group. Effectively this meant that they were able to control not only the political but also the social dimensions of the group. Being a ‘leader’ here also allowed one to influence how work was done in the group and by whom. Yet it came at the cost of constant work for yourself, a constant need to saturate yourself with tasks but also a sense of martyrdom. A sacrifice of yourself to the state, to others. This allowed a certain power to form through manipulation of people’s respect and, perhaps, guilt

at their own perceived lack of sacrifice or work commitment. This mirrors Jo Freeman's description of the 'elite' group formed via structurelessness in her astoundingly resonant essay *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*.

Related to this, state repression had a large effect on this informal hierarchy. The state and its actors do not comprehend fully the idea of a non-hierarchical organisation nor do they recognise actions as being collective. Freeman describes these de facto leaders as 'stars' who are selected without the consent of the group and who, therefore, are not accountable to the group itself as they might be were they selected by it. This functioned a little differently in our group, however, as we did tend to release things like press statements and statements posted on our collective blog about our actions rather than speaking directly to the press. Instead of controlling the public narrative the victimisation of individuals by the state meant that the group was forced to galvanise around these individuals, who were victimised by the state due to implicit leadership, in order to support them. This is common in activist circles which tend to institute person-specific campaigns around those who are experiencing repression in some way.

Our group did experience a large degree of state repression as it often participated in high-risk actions such as occupation, confrontational protests, rallies and banner drops. Those who tended towards taking on the higher risk positions during actions were often part of the aforementioned 'elite' group and were able to consolidate their power through continuing to place themselves in these high risk roles.

Whilst it is important to support our victimised comrades in a political sense there is also a large extent to which they must be supported emotionally and socially. This work can often fall upon their partners and close friends and thus not be taken up by the group as a whole. Of course, this is only natural as we tend to see this type of work as fundamentally 'private' and therefore not of political import or concern. However, this does have an impact upon those closest to those comrades as they are doing a great deal of unrecognised and undervalued labour. This labour typically falls on women and feminised people, as it did in our case.

In terms of overall care for one another this theme continues to be of concern. Fundamentally some people have higher care needs than others – thus, the idea that care and reception of care can be doled out equally is a flawed perspective. One's need for care and capacity to enact care for others can alter many times in the course of one's life. This depends on many factors but within the context of our activist group we saw this play out in specific ways. Disability and the need for

physical and emotional comfort in the face of it had a large impact on power dynamics, for example, as it was never formally recognised.

Many groups lack the ability and political direction to confront these matters directly. Our context was one of chaotic and campaign-driven organisation which did not take seriously questions of care, social reproduction and emotional labour. Many of us were very young activists for whom this was a formative political experience. In many ways, our relative youth and inexperience led to our inability to challenge one another and to have the confidence to intervene in our comrades' social and political activity. We did not have a strong point of reference for how to do this, nor much experience of how political organisation functions and grows. Those with more experience did not tend to disseminate this information effectively. Though there were often attempts to transfer practical skills there was little meta conversation of how the group itself functioned.

It is difficult to determine an overall view or perspective towards sexualised violence that those in the group held. Certainly among us were strongly feminist people, many of whom pursued more explicitly feminist activity, such as Women's Association, outside of the group. It was commonly brought up, for example, how education cuts could affect women differently and more substantially than men. Many of the 'elite' group were women and the group itself was fairly gender balanced. Politics of identity had their place in the discussion, in an abstract sense, yet in our own personal context they were not usually applied. Certainly we had absolutely no formal mechanism to cope with conflict in the group, let alone anything more serious such as rape.

Interestingly, in this discussion of the 'elite' or 'in' group it should be noted that, in fact, both survivor and perpetrator could be categorised as belonging to said 'elite'. Although this gave both some level of power, it also isolated them. Seeming to be in charge, a 'power couple' beyond reproach meant that they were also seen as invulnerable. They were allowed to take on political work together, were considered to be 'taking care' of one another and thus have no need of outside care or influence. This is a common problem and exists due to the heteronormative view of relationships, particularly intimate partner relationships, as thoroughly 'private' and not to be meddled in by those outside of them.

Here we can see, then, that all levels here play into one another: the general into the specific and vice versa. What's more – we can see patterns emerging, the structures we exist in, the context, the political situations, the interpersonal dynamics between us all playing their part in creating our own interpretations of

the situation we found and continue to find ourselves in. Some key themes that we identified, in all cases, were those questions of the relegation of care, social reproduction and emotional labour to an implicit gendered task rather than a task or tasks of political and social import. This is a general statement yet one that resonates throughout society, the student movement and our own group as well as the lives of the individuals who participated in it.

## Limiting factors

As a group responding to an incidence of sexual violence we were limited throughout the process by issues of trust, the priorities and division of labour around the distribution of care and support work, as well as geographical and organisational constraints.

### ***Trust, Priorities and the Division of Labour***

As a group responding to an incidence of sexual violence we were limited throughout the process by issues surrounding trust. Some of us involved were not well acquainted at the beginning of this process and as such had not had the opportunity to establish strong bonds. For others, bonds had already been established but trust had been shaken as a result of the revelations of sexually violent behaviour. This applies to trust between those involved in this process, as well as trust between those involved and the perpetrator.

There were other interpersonal factors which meant that it was difficult to proceed with this process. Many members of our group are involved in other political activity, including being members of national organisations, and as such there were very often timing clashes with meetings and events. As such, the workload that people take on outside the process places pressure on processes like this one and the question of priorities becomes a factor in what kind of structures we can set up. The question of priorities became a concern relatively early on as the size of the group actively involved in this process shrank and the work of pushing the process forwards fell on fewer people.

How the labour is divided is an important issue to consider when engaging in a process like this one, particularly considering the emotive and complex nature of the issues at hand. Indeed, the pressure that this kind of work places on the interpersonal relationships between the individuals involved in it should not be underestimated. This was further exacerbated in our case because the isolation referred to previously meant that at points during the process the meetings were the only time that members of the support group met each other.

### ***Geography***

In our case both the victim and the perpetrator were no longer in the city where the original incidences of sexual violence took place. The victim had a support group working with them directly in Germany and this meant that we were relieved

of the work which went into supporting them directly. As such, our work supporting the victim was limited to what could be called a theoretical role because the need to provide immediate emotional support for the victim was not necessary. Our contribution to their welfare was instead bound up in creating an environment in which they could be satisfied that their story was believed and that the incidences were taken seriously by the community. In order to create this environment, we met regularly to discuss the history of our student group and how its structures had facilitated sexual violence.

Some of those involved in these discussions also formed a contact group which was tasked with maintaining contact with the perpetrator in order to hold them accountable for their actions. As a result of geographical distance, the question of whether we would need to exclude the perpetrator in order to create a safer space for the victim did not arise in our case. However, the geographical distance did mean that it was difficult to conduct the contact work with any regularity or consistency. This was compounded further by the inconsistency of the perpetrator's engagement with the contact group. Therefore, geography is a factor in dealing with sexual violence and different challenges can emerge depending on whether or not the perpetrator is present or absent.

### ***Membership and non-member organisations***

The community involved had been largely brought together through being involved in free education activity at the university. This composition does not provide a stable basis for community accountability processes like this one because it is a common occurrence for people to move to other cities and even other countries to work or study after leaving university. As a result, different individuals involved in the process became more and less prominent at different times and in relation to different kinds of tasks as people both left the process and the community at large recomposed itself. This in effect meant that different skill sets became more or less important for continuing the work at different moments within the process. As such, because communities which emerge from student activism are unstable in the long term they can only provide sufficient cohesion for engaging in long-term processes like this one if those involved are willing and able to change direction as the process evolves.

In addition, the free education group which many of us had been in was always done on a voluntary basis. Further to this, many of our group's actions were illegal and carried out publicly. As a result we had to deal with the ever present possibility (and at times very real reality) of state repression. In this context, keeping formal

membership lists would have been a security risk and so the community was by necessity ill-defined and amorphous. Engagement in this process therefore came down to an individual commitment which was either felt or was not. There was no organisational mechanism with which to discipline anyone for not being involved and there was no way of collectively determining exactly who should be told about the process once it had started or who should be involved in it.

In effect, the process mirrored our previous free education group in the sense that it was done on a voluntary basis which consolidated itself around a core group of those most committed and able to engage in the work. Due to the length of this process and the unstable nature of student communities, the community broke down throughout this process and the composition of the group had to change. If this process had happened inside a membership organisation it is arguably the case that those involved would feel an organisational responsibility to be involved even if they moved to a new city. This is itself more likely if the new city that they moved to has a local branch of their organisation that they could get involved with. However, this is likely only if the organisation has an internal culture which takes incidences of sexual violence seriously.

### ***Support and Care***

The work which this process involved was often physically, emotionally and mentally draining. As such it is crucial for the sustainability of a process like this that those involved in it are able to have others to turn to in order to provide them with support. Who these supportive others were differed for different individuals involved in the work. For some, supportive others came in the form of intimate partners and in some cases both partners were involved in the process. For others involved in the work, supportive others came primarily in the form of friends or housemates. Intimate partners, friends and housemates not directly involved in the work formed a broader layer of engagement which was not always recognised though it was in effect crucial to the daily reproduction of the process as a whole. However, in practically all cases these supportive others were not trained to either provide this support or even see the warning signs that someone may need support. In addition, given the composition of our community there were many issues around physical and mental health which meant that it arguably would not have been possible even given the training for this broader layer to actually provide the support to those directly involved which was required. As a result, different individuals directly involved in the work experienced support in wildly varying ways

depending on which members of the broader layer that they came into contact with and under what circumstances. There were several reasons for this.

As discussed earlier, at the micro-level there had historically been a lack of formal welfare provision within our free education group. This was something which had been raised many times throughout the history of the group and though there were attempts to engage with this at different times it most usually happened following risky actions such as occupations. This support included arrestee support for those who had been arrested as well as post-action meetings to which anybody could attend. However, outside of these flash points there was an insufficient institutionalisation of a welfare culture in our group. This was in part due to the aforementioned lack of training in this work but it was also reflective of the instrumentalisation of social relations which had been internalised within our group during the campaign for free education. Indeed, though many individuals may have in some cases deeply cared for and supported each other in their personal relationships, as far as the group was concerned people were considered one-dimensionally in terms of how useful they were to the aim of fighting for free education. In effect then, the group operated in the public sphere with the political aims of reclaiming space within the corporatised university and influencing education policy at the level of the state whilst care and support at the micro-level was left to individuals in the private sphere.

### **Critical Masculinity**

The issue of trust which had been evident throughout this process was a factor in who was to be involved in this project in its early stages. This was influenced by many factors but a particularly salient one was our commitment to not only examine masculinity critically but to do so from a perspective heavily influenced by Marxism. As such, we were in a sense limited by our political commitment to Marxism as well as the nature of our relationships with each other which had been mediated by this commitment. Indeed, the intention was not only to reinterpret our own experiences in light of the structural dynamics which had shaped our lived experiences as men but also to push Marxist theory beyond itself by examining masculinity through the application of Marxist concepts. In light of this commitment, we wanted to avoid simply rehashing old arguments about who has privilege and who doesn't. During our days involved in the free education movement we had seen how this tended to degenerate into a shit slinging contest and were aware that this kind of behaviour in the early stages of developing a critical masculinities project could easily derail the development of it.

This is by no means unique to the project that we attempted but is always a potential outcome of left interventions in an era characterised by the entrenchment of a neoliberal economic, social, and political order. This is because a chief characteristic of this era is the tendency towards a hyper-individualised form of reason and rationality which attempts to explain social phenomena solely by reference to the immediate and the personal. While there is much to be said for agent centric explanations, the reduction of explanations to this are flawed in that they ignore meso-level institutions and macro-level structures which are impersonal and must be examined if agents themselves are to change. As such, arguments which remain at the level of a tit for tat over who has the most privilege are potentially toxic in the context of the early days of a consciousness raising initiative which are intended to bring to consciousness shared experiences whilst also providing an opportunity for personal reexamination. This tension between the general and the particular, between the shared characteristics of those belonging to a social group and the manner in which these characteristics are manifested in the behaviour of specific individuals, applies to consciousness raising activity broadly. However, it has specific difficulties for examining masculinity because this has not been broadly engaged with by either the left historically or within our particular community.

Another aspect which had its influence was the constantly present reality of busy schedules which had also affected the broader process itself. Indeed, throughout the process there were issues with timing clashes due to members of the process being involved in other political projects. However, as already noted, the four individuals who were involved at this early stage were not involved in many other political projects at that time and it was hoped that this would mitigate some of the overwork and burnout which would hamper the difficult work of engaging in consciousness raising activity. It is worth noting at this point that the critical masculinities project was proposed a second time at a meeting of one of the organisations which several members of the process, including the author of this section, have also been involved in. In the view of the author of this section, at the time this organisation was characterised by an unsustainable culture of overwork and burnout. It is unsurprising then that the project was once again rejected and this time it was explicitly on the grounds that other projects were of a higher priority. As such, overwork and burnout should not be left critically unexamined since it is also always important to consider how both individuals and organisations decide which forms of activity they prioritise at any given time.

## Challenging the assumptions that protect perpetrators

The following text was written in the first few months of the process as a response to concerns being raised around the perpetrator's need for support. We added it in here, as we believe that the arguments brought about for the need to sympathise with the perpetrator are commonly used to disarm attempts at holding them accountable for their actions.

From the very beginning of the accountability process in Birmingham a number of variations of a very similar argument have been made. This argument is not unique to the space of the Birmingham left, but is pervasive in discussions of sexual violence more broadly. In the case of this process about the rape and abuse that X committed, the argument that was used to challenge the process has a number of variations, with different times things being left unsaid or unstressed, however the basic structure goes something like this:

*Even though the letter states that we should not focus on the perpetrator, and that the point of discussing the structures that enabled this case is to find ways of political organising that make sexual violence less likely to happen; this is a lie. What the process is really about is punishing the perpetrator, and getting out the spite, political disagreements (or even 'violence') we have towards him. This then leads onto an argument about how the perpetrator should be dealt with, that isn't 'really' about punishing them. This goes something like:*

- 1. In order to do what they have perpetrators must be seriously damaged.*
- 2. Many perpetrators have been victims of sexual violence themselves, or have mental health problems, or problems with drugs or alcohol.*
- 3. It is not helpful to take a conflictual approach with them, or 'make them feel bad', this will only prevent them from changing themselves.*
- 4. Instead perpetrators need 'support' from those around them to understand that what they did was wrong, and to help them to change.*

The first thing to say about this argument is its contempt for the position of the victim, and the politics that has been developed in the process and the letter. In the letter, the victim has explicitly stated that the process is not about focusing on the perpetrator and developed at length the reasons for discussing the structures that enabled this case to happen.

Proponents of the above argument simply dismiss this without argument and use the untrue assertion that the process is really about punishing the perpetrator. This is something that has now happened a number of times within this process. The victim and her support group have made it clear, that they don't want to focus on the perpetrator. People claiming that the process is about punishing the perpetrator - without any justification other than that it is hard for the perpetrator to now be confronted with people knowing about their rape and abuse - are doing exactly this. This focus would prevent the process from taking the perspective of the victim or addressing the structures within society and left groups that allow this to happen.

Making dealing with the perpetrator the main or exclusive focus of a process on sexual violence is very common (even the phrase 'accountability process' implies that dealing with the perpetrator is the point). It is, however, extremely unhelpful for a number of reasons.

Firstly, focusing on the perpetrator continues the overemphasis on their needs over those of the victim. This is especially true in processes that see their main goal as the speedy 'rehabilitation' of the perpetrator. But it is also true in a negative sense for processes that simply exclude the perpetrator. In both cases the perpetrator and his personal circumstances are taken as the main thing to be addressed and success is measured by what happens to them.

Secondly focusing on the perpetrator is likely to make the process disappointing and seem pointless. The fact that someone can be so violent to people with whom they supposedly have an intimate connection does not come from nowhere and it does not go away without serious work and time. Abuser programs in many different contexts have extremely low success rates. In the majority of cases the perpetrator is simply unwilling to embark on the process of self-reflection and work that is necessary to allow them to change. Instead they tend to push the responsibility off themselves and portray themselves as a victim. Even where the perpetrator shows some degree of willingness to participate, processes are often unsuccessful. As will be explained below, this is even more likely to happen if those around the perpetrator protect them from being confronted with what they have done and believe that the primary necessity is to counsel or support them in order to overcome personal problems.

Thirdly focusing on the perpetrator leaves more important questions unaddressed. If the primary aim of a process is taken to be supporting the perpetrator or just excluding and punishing them, then the process cannot adequately address the

questions of how to take the perspective of the victim and take responsibility for dealing with what has happened to them. It also cannot adequately address the question of the structures that enable sexual violence and abuse to take place in wider society and within left groups.

Any process of dealing with sexual violence must first of all address how the victim can be supported and how their perspective can be taken on by the political or social group around them. This means collectively taking on the work and emotional effort of dealing with a case of sexual violence, making sure that the victim can continue to exist and operate within political and social groups, and making the needs of the victim central to any work that is carried out. Secondly the structures of violence that enable abuse to take place need to be analysed and ways of acting or organising that minimise these structures need to be carried out. Within left organisations it is insufficient to blame abuse on a nebulous concept of patriarchy that operates on left groups from the outside. There are specific structures of violence that apply within political groups that need to be analysed and addressed. The pattern of central figure within a group (usually men) who believe that the role of others in the group (usually women) is to support them and to satisfy their needs, occurs time and time again and there is an urgent need to develop methods of working that prevent this pattern as far as possible.

In our opinion, the question of how to deal with the perpetrator is considerably less important than these two objectives; however as those who are criticising this process tend to focus entirely on how to deal with the perpetrator it seems necessary to address some misconceptions about the best way of going about this here. The arguments presented in 1-4 put forward an extremely flawed way of trying to get a perpetrator to go through a process of positive change.

### ***Therapy and Perpetrator Work***

In order to go into this, it is worth examining some of the differences between traditional talk therapy, and the approach of perpetrator programs. This has implications, not only for the best kind of clinical programs, but also for the way that non-professionals should act towards a perpetrator if they want them to change. Traditional talk therapy was originally developed to help traumatised women come to terms with, and reconstruct, the abuse that they had been through. One of the main points of this is to address negative misconceptions of themselves and the environment that have been constructed by the victim as a response to the violent acts committed to them. This could be for example, that the victim has not protected themselves enough, brought it onto themselves, deserved

it, etc. The counsellor or therapist here is a supportive platform that helps the victim address those negative misconceptions or sometimes subconscious beliefs. An important aspect of this is that the victim comes from a position of diminished self-worth and negative perception of themselves due to the atrocities committed on them. This kind of counselling takes place purely between the counsellor and the person receiving it and needs no input or perspective from third parties.

This kind of therapy (and methods of support from friends that draw on it) is alone not appropriate when it comes to perpetrators, as their position and misconceptions are of a completely different nature. In order to rape or abuse someone a perpetrator must have a structure of justifications that allow them to see what they are doing as justified. For example, they may think that they are owed sex as this is a part of being in a relationship or that even if a sexual partner says “no” or does not give consent this can be ignored. Perpetrators must have a distorted understanding of the importance of their own needs. They must overvalue their needs and devalue the needs and human character of the victim to the extent that they can satisfy their selfish desires, without concern for the needs of the other person. In order to challenge these misconceptions a practitioner or friend cannot just be supportive but must confront the perpetrator with what they have done and challenge the perspective that allowed them to do it.

Counselling will not normally seek to challenge these misconceptions and behaviours, and often inappropriate training and possibly a lack of understanding of basic feminist politics will make it extremely unlikely that these issues are being dealt with. Furthermore, if the counselling is not specifically sought out to do perpetrator work the perpetrator has more freedom to evade or completely ignore the rape and abuse committed by them in their sessions. As mentioned above, most likely perpetrators will victimise themselves and focus on how to make themselves feel better. The perpetrator could easily choose to never mention the rape and focus on completely different issues.

Perpetrators do not only seek to justify to themselves what they have done but use a variety of methods to do so to others (whether consciously or unconsciously). If a counsellor or friend only talks to the perpetrator, they only hear their perspective and it gives the perpetrator the power to decide what information to divulge and the ability to set the framework of interpretation. The normal process of counselling gives room to the person being counselled (in this case the perpetrator) to focus on their needs and perspective. In cases of sexual violence this means that counselling continues to focus on the needs and perspective of the perpetrator over that of the victim and therefore reproduces one of the factors that lead to

sexual violence. Therefore, a counsellor or friend cannot just talk to the perpetrator but must actively listen to the perspective of the victim and use this to confront the perpetrator and challenge their self-justifications.

To recap a traditional counselling approach - or supportive friendships that follow similar steps and seek to accomplish similar goals - are likely to be ineffective or even counterproductive when it comes to perpetrators because:

1. It would not be normal counselling practice to confront the perpetrator with what they have done or to make sure that they accept their responsibility for it.
2. They ignore the perspective of the victim and so reproduce the dynamics that lead to sexual violence and abuse.
3. They do not challenge the mindset and justifications of the perpetrator that allowed them to commit their atrocities. The politics of the argument at the top of this document does not do anything to address any of these three problems, but rather seeks to inhibit the kind of challenge that is necessary for a perpetrator to genuinely change.

### ***The role of the perpetrator's personal circumstances***

The idea that a perpetrator commits violence because they are damaged in some way (drug or alcohol addiction, anger issues, mental health problems, previous experiences of abuse, etc.) is pervasive in political and popular debate. This implies that what we need to do to deal with a perpetrator is address the thing that has damaged them in order for them to come to an understanding of their abusive behaviour. The problem with this argument is that it conflates people's needs with how they chose to satisfy those needs. Obviously, everybody has needs of all forms. Circumstances that have affected the perpetrator's well-being can undoubtedly have an impact on these needs. But the relevant point in a case of sexual violence is not that the perpetrator has needs, but that they make a conscious decision to overvalue their own needs over the needs of the victim. Arguments along the line of "the perpetrator needs love and support" are therefore of course not wrong. Almost every person needs love and support and valuation. But in the context of a process on a rape committed by the perpetrator, it again supports the assumption that the needs of the perpetrator are more important than the needs of the victim. Before, the perpetrator's overvaluation of their own needs led them to violate the victim's bodily integrity, now their needs are getting placed at the focal point of the process again. The claim that the perpetrator needs support is particularly insidious when (as is the case in the argument above) support means attacking the aims of a

process on sexual violence and shielding the perpetrator from accountability for what they have done.

All explanations that treat perpetrators as victims of outside circumstances are rejected by perpetrator programs as justifications for abuse, because sexual violence and abuse are deliberate, functional, and planned behaviours. People chose to commit sexual violence, they do it for a reason, and gain a benefit from doing so. Treatments that seek to address circumstances that affect the perpetrator (programs for substance abuse, counselling, mediation, or anger management) without tackling their abusive mentality, can often make the situation worse. This is because it can provide the perpetrator with excuses that they can use to manipulate their victim or others around them, or give them false hope, while not addressing the central issue. Relevant factors in explaining domestic abuse, in the words of a set of guidelines on perpetrator work from the Scottish government (<http://bit.ly/1QJAYQw>) are: “Gender Inequality, An abuse of power, Privacy of the home and resistance to becoming involved in what is seen as a private matter, Attitudes and beliefs of some men as to their gender entitlement over women, and Ineffective sanctions for perpetrators of abuse.” These are precisely the issues that we are attempting to address in this process and that people are actively derailing when they make the argument outlined above.

When they are confronted with what they have done perpetrators almost always seek to deny responsibility and portray themselves as a victim (as has happened in this case). If this mentality is continued by the perpetrator and accepted by those around them, it inhibits the process of reflection and work that can produce real change. A counsellor or supportive friends don't confront and challenge perpetrators with what they have done, or the dehumanisation and warped perspective that allowed them to do it; and yet it is this confrontation and challenge that a perpetrator above all needs in order to progress. The most successful forms of perpetrator work focus on constantly challenging them and always maintaining and reasserting their responsibility for the acts they have committed. If the perspective of the victim is not adopted by people involved in and around the process (or society as a whole hopefully in the future) then this allows the perpetrator to continue to bring forward their perception of entitlement through needs and allows them to in that sense portray themselves as a victim (of their own needs, of environment, of the past). This is one of the justifications that allows perpetrators to evade a critical engagement and not change themselves in a way that protects people around them.

# Conclusions

## A Personal Conclusion

*2020, almost 8 years after I have been raped by my former boyfriend for the first time, and 5 years after I made it public by writing the open letter, I want to summarise what I have taken from this accountability process that I initiated and fought for.*

### ***It matters that and how people speak about sexualised violence***

The reason I spoke about my experiences of abuse was because someone else had done it. The letter of a person publishing their experience of rape and violence opened up a space for me to talk about the questions bothering me without having to raise them myself out of the blue. It created a debate in the left scene that offered me a way out of the silence and isolation that I had seen myself stuck in. The open and supportive positioning of my political organisation towards victims of sexualised violence and my flatmates reading anti-sexist books on this subject, finally gave me the confidence to open up about my own experiences.

### ***Shifting the blame: to be questioned and silenced***

The reasons why people thought I should not talk about my experiences were diverse, but almost all of them were accusing in one way or another. People questioned my experiences as well as my intentions of speaking up. Some suggested I was on a personal revenge trip and unable to think reasonably. Some suggested sexualised violence was a private matter and should not take up so much space and time. Others (or sometimes the same people) were worried that it could destroy the social or political cohesion and yet others raised concerns about the negative consequences that an open letter would have on the perpetrator, his surroundings and the broader left scene, as well as other victims/survivors. Instead of the fact that my ex-boyfriend had raped me, the act of speaking up was being made to be the problem and seen to be damaging and harming people. This is ridiculous.

All these different forms of delegitimising the simple act of writing a letter, made me realise that the fear of speaking up wasn't something irrational. I could see all the good reasons why I hadn't done it before. The emphasis in the open letter on supporting victims to speak up was meant to acknowledge how hard this can be

and that I would not have lived through this time if I didn't have the support that I did.

### ***Solidarity takes courage and commitment***

By the time we had finished writing the letter, only two out of nine people in Birmingham were prepared to distribute it. At that moment, the silencing took on a very practical form. Some didn't want to hand out the letter because they didn't find the time, others because they felt a sense of overburdening. But most people refused to hand out the letter because they disagreed with its content and distribution. They made it clear that those people who would hand out the letter on my behalf would be criticised for it and made responsible for any negative outcomes this may have on the welfare of any one person or the group at large. This pressure worked to protect the perpetrator and the power structures that had supported and sustained his actions.

Until today I am infinitely grateful that those two people, and everyone who decided to help them and be part of the process since, had the courage to pull this through. And to do so despite the hostility they were faced with and the insecurity they may have felt themselves. Supporting me in this process and the conflicts that came with it wasn't easy. It required not only a lot of time and energy, but also for people to risk their own social stability by standing up for someone else. This has been the strongest sense of solidarity and commitment I have experienced in my life.

### ***Community accountability depends on a community willing to engage***

I didn't go to the police because I didn't want to entrust dealing with my experiences to the justice system and because I believed that a left-wing movement could do better at holding a perpetrator of sexualised violence accountable. Frankly, this has failed and it is frustrating to know he is surrounded by people who know about the open letter and the demands towards him, but see no problem in him doing politics or in having responsibility to hold him accountable.

However, I am glad we decided from the beginning to not make this accountability process about the perpetrator, but about us. The process in Birmingham and the reflections they have written, have helped me to validate and contextualise my own experiences. By treating this as a political issue rather than a personal problem, it has shown not just me but also others, that sexualised violence is taken seriously

and victims can expect support instead of silencing and doubts. And despite the lack of cooperation by the perpetrator, the establishing of a contact group and informing his surroundings have allowed me to give up on the wrong feeling of responsibility that I felt towards his actions and to move on with my own life.

### ***Feeling guilty doesn't help anyone***

This conclusion may read thus far as if there are good and bad people and indeed, either you side with a victim or you don't. There is no inbetween and no neutrality. But people make mistakes and people can learn. This is not to suggest that victims should be forgiving with all the shit that gets thrown at them. But to the people who contribute to the hell that victims go through; don't be too proud to admit you made a mistake and do the right thing next time. And of course there are also those people who just don't know what to do. A lot of people avoided me after I started speaking about my experiences because they were insecure and/or felt some sense of bad consciousness for not supporting me (enough). This applies to people in my current political organisation as well as to people who invested countless hours into this process. And it made the situation a lot worse for me because it is uncomfortable to be avoided when you have just shared something so intimate and it is exhausting to always be the one to approach people and make them feel secure. I never expected much of people but the insecurity and guilt that people felt inhibited them to do what would have been so valuable for me at the time; to express their solidarity. The few emails I received in response to the open letter belong to the most encouraging moments for me in this process.

### ***Conclusion***

It is no exaggeration when I say this accountability process has changed my life. I no longer feel ashamed or guilty for having become a victim of sexualised violence and through this process I have gained back a feeling of agency in dealing with it. It has empowered me to speak about the secret that has kept me at a distance from old and new friends and which had created an unspeakable isolation and loneliness. It has made me aware of the reactionary forces that are no imagination of victims/survivors and put me in a place to be active on this topic politically. The solidarity I have felt throughout this has allowed me to stay active in left wing politics and gave me back a feeling of confidence and hope that this is something worth fighting for.

## Contact Group Conclusion

*This is a report from the contact group that was set up to keep in touch with the perpetrator in this case of sexualised violence, and make sure he carried out the demands made by the victim and their support group.*

*At the time of writing this, more than four and a half years have passed; in this time he has not carried out any of the demands set out in the letter. We are writing this report so that others can learn from what we have done. Ultimately we think that processes around sexualised violence cannot take responsibility for changing or rehabilitating perpetrators. The only person who has the power to change the perpetrator is them, and many perpetrators (including the person in this case) are unwilling to do so. Too many processes around sexual violence echo the abuse that has already been carried out, in that they put all of the focus on the perpetrator while neglecting the victim and how they can be supported. For us the role of a contact group is about validating and upholding the victim's perspective on sexual violence. This is done by enforcing as far as possible the demands of the victim, and making sure that the perpetrator is challenged with the victim's perspective.*

The contact group was formed at the end of 2015 to take on the task of being the point of contact for the perpetrator (will is given the name X from now on following what is used in the letter) taking this task over from the victim and their support group. The role of the contact group was to stay in touch with X and make sure that he was fulfilling the demands that were set out in the letter and to provide a critical reflection from the victim's perspective without them needing to personally be in contact with X. The demands from the letter were:

### *1. Seek critical help to recall and understand what he has done in order to change*

*We believe that taking responsibility for his actions must involve him recalling and understanding his acts of violence. This is why we demanded of him – and provided him with some contact information – to seek competent and critical help to do perpetrator work with him. At the time of writing this, he still claims to not recall his*

acts of violence. Considering his actions and the verbal and physical resistance of the victim, we think this is very unlikely and otherwise a serious problem.

## *2. Inform any new political environment and sexual partners about his abusive behaviour*

We also believe that a perpetrator has the responsibility to make his past transparent to the people around him. This for us concerns any future sexual partners, but also people he works with politically. This is not to punish him but so that they can – on the basis of that information and his way of dealing with it – decide for themselves in what ways they trust him. As we see his acts of violence not as single events but also linked to abusive tendencies in the way he does politics and further believe that it was his powerful position within political groups that allowed him to get away with it, we think it is important that if he wants to continue doing politics, the people around him are informed. This includes not just the leaders of political groups, but especially those who are not in the center of decisions, in less central and powerful positions.

## *3. Stay accountable to us and a contact group*

We think it is important that X cannot run away from his responsibilities by changing political group, city or friends. For the time being, we are in contact with him and will continue to do so over the next few months in order to allow the discussions in Birmingham to not focus on this task. In the future, we hope to establish a contact group in the UK to take over and discuss with him the steps he is taking in response to our demands and beyond. We think this group should be formed by people who are not close friends of X but willing to be part of this process.”

None of us had experience of doing something like this before and from the start of forming the group we tried to recognise the limitations of what we could achieve. We are only volunteers and have no power to force the perpetrator to do anything. We had help from people from the support group who had previously been involved in contact with perpetrators. They advised that we should not be taking responsibility for X's actions or his 'rehabilitation' because only he can do this, and

because taking the responsibility from him gives him power over the process. Instead we saw our role as the more limited one of making sure that he carries out the demands in the letter, and listening critically to his reflections. All of us agreed with the demands as very reasonable and worthwhile ones to direct at someone who has committed rape.

### ***Our perspective***

Given that none of us had done anything like this before, when we started this process we needed to do a lot of thinking and reading around the subject. Through our reading, discussions we had with people who were supporting the perpetrator, and the contact group work; we came to some perspectives on rape that we think are useful when dealing with a perpetrator.

Unlike many processes we do not believe that the primary or only point of contact group work should be about making the perpetrator 'accountable' or rehabilitating them. For us the most important goal of contact with a perpetrator should be to believe and uphold the victim's narrative of what has happened to them and to support them to continue to be a part of the group. These are not abstract goals, but are fundamental to recovery from the trauma of sexual violence. All too often victims are forced to withdraw from their political or social group, while the perpetrator stays and shapes their own narrative of events. Demands made of the perpetrator seek to establish (in whichever way that might be) a way that the victim can continue to be part of the group, and the community enforcement of these demands shows to all sides that the community upholds and acts upon what the victim has said about their abuse. Listening to and critiquing the narrative of the perpetrator allows the victim's narrative of events to be asserted - and the perpetrator's distorted perceptions challenged - without the victim needing to do this deeply traumatic work themselves.

One of the starting points for our understanding of sexual violence and the approach we would take with X is that committing abusive violence is a choice. Most (if not all) programmes that work with abusive men hold as a fundamental

tenet that abusive men need to take full responsibility for their behaviour. Perpetrators try to justify themselves and blame their actions on outside factors, whether that is their partner, substance abuse or a history of previous violence. Issues from a person's past can explain why they have strong needs (psychological, social, emotional, etc), but not why they chose to satisfy those needs by raping or abusing another person. The fact is that the majority of substance abusers, victims of violence, or any other personal experience you might choose do not go on to commit abusive violence themselves. The explanation for abusive violence must be something more than this. It should explain why and how a perpetrator makes the choice to abuse someone.

In order to make the decision to rape someone, a perpetrator has to have some self-justification of what they are doing. People always try to justify their actions in some way, even if they know with another part of themselves that what they are doing is wrong. These self-justifications can take a variety of forms. Perpetrators often think that the victim is provoking them and somehow deserves it, that they are entitled to sex or to the victim's care or subservience, or that they simply cannot control themselves and so do not have responsibility for what they are doing. All justifications for raping or abusing someone are, in our view, inherently delusional. The perpetrator must warp the way they see the world to justify the unjustifiable. They satisfy their needs by completely ignoring the needs, bodily integrity and selfhood of their victim.

A perpetrator is always getting something from abusing their partner, otherwise they wouldn't do it. This is not to say that the abuse is making them happy, but that it gives them some kind of psychological or physical benefit. Very often this benefit is a feeling of power that comes from dominating another person and subjecting them to the perpetrator's will. A genuine reflection on abuse requires the perpetrator to understand the needs that are met through abusing someone, and to see how extremely selfish this is. The perpetrator puts their needs so far above that of their victim that their short-term psychological gain is worth destroying their victim's psychological and bodily integrity for.

For us any genuine reflection on abusive behaviour has to come to terms with (at least) these three points. If a perpetrator does not take responsibility for the abuse, they are continuing with the self-justifications that allowed them to abuse someone in the first place. If they can't recognise and come to terms with the psychological benefits they gained through their violence, how can they learn to meet these needs in a non-destructive way. At no point in the process did X come to terms or reflect on any of this openly. Instead he constantly centered himself and posited himself as somebody who was hard done by, while refusing to take responsibility for what he had done.

### **Chronology**

The contact group was first established at the beginning of 2016 in a meeting in Birmingham at which the victim was present. It was decided that having a contact group was a necessary step to take the burden of staying in touch with X from the victim and their support group in Berlin. General reasons for having a support group and what their task should be are outlined in the iL-guidelines.

At that meeting, there was a call-out for volunteers to be part of a contact group. This group would provide a means of ensuring ongoing contact with X, relay the demands set out in the open letter and facilitate a correct interpretation of the demands by X and people around them. We hoped to create a critical surrounding for X which is necessary for him to genuinely reflect on his actions. So far, the support group for the victim in Berlin had been supporting the victim throughout the establishment of the process, the writing of the letter and the branching out of the process in Birmingham and also being in contact with X. Apart from recognising that this is a position that is difficult to maintain, we also hoped that our relative physical proximity would make it easier to work with X.

Five people volunteered from this meeting, two of whom had been initially told about the rape by the victim and their support group and started the extension of the accountability process into the UK, two others who had been part of the group

that handed out the letters in the initial stages of the process in Birmingham and one other person. The contact group was split between Birmingham and Glasgow. We believe that this split was necessary at the time in order to get enough people willing to be part of the contact group, but it was challenging to have online meetings on such difficult and emotionally charged themes.

After the formation of the group a series of meetings took place in order to discuss how we saw our role as the contact group, how to best ensure our own accountability to the process as a whole and what our tasks would entail. The iL-guidelines were a useful starting point to these conversations. The process in Birmingham involved separate groups: a general support and discussion group (considered the central community accountability group), a contact group, and later a reading group. As the contact group, we set ourselves the aim to report back to the central community accountability group throughout the process.

Our tasks were derived from the initial open letter. It was our task to ensure that other people in the surroundings of the perpetrator could make informed decisions about how they wanted to relate to X, facilitate the demands to be met, and as well as establishing a critical environment. As the general community accountability group had been running in Birmingham for the better part of 6 months, many were disconnected from X. By moving away from Birmingham, he had distanced himself effectively before the open letter was disseminated, and only kept in contact with people whose initial response to the process had failed to take on a victim-centered approach. He had at this point not been in touch with the group in Berlin or the victim for months, nor had he informed more people, as demanded in the letter.

We started by getting in touch with X. We notified him of the formation of the contact group and told him that we were to take over from the group in Berlin. We then proceeded with notifying his partner and a few people around him, informing them of our existence, and asking them to support the demands that were made in the letter.

For more than 5 months, we had no response from X other than a first Email acknowledging the Email and saying he would respond soon. During that time, we

tried to get in touch via other means, such as asking people in his surrounding to get him to get in touch with us; this also proved to be ineffective. We emailed him again, laying out the demands and asking if he had any reflections to offer or had done anything to meet the demands. We also utilized this time to respond to queries made by others who knew of the process, wanted to understand it more or had questions regarding what responsibilities they could or should take on in this process.

The first response from X was 5 months after we sent our first email as a contact group. The email was only a few sentences and inquired about the possibility of a face-to-face meeting. A meeting was organised. It took place around a year after our first email to him. In this meeting we discussed the demands with X and worked out intermediate actions to fulfil the demands, as he had by that point not done anything to meet them. We agreed to an additional meeting three months later and that there would be a meeting every three months thereafter. However in addition we asked for regular email contact and reflections to be sent to us so we could sufficiently prepare for the meetings. We also had two other meetings on the day of the first meeting with X: one with his partner at the time and a friend of theirs, and another with two people from his close friendship group that had been amongst the people initially told in Birmingham.

We consistently and clearly expressed that whilst we were not demanding that anybody distance themselves from X, we did express the hope that people in his surroundings would recognize their responsibility to actively challenge him with regards to his participation in the process and his reflections on what he had done. We further expressed an expectation that people would read the letter and act from a perspective that supported the victim's narrative and thereby supports a fulfilling of the demands.

As agreed, we had a second meeting around three months later. At this point X had still not informed anybody himself, although he had had a few conversations about raping the victim with some of the people we had also met at the first meeting. These were people who had been informed of the process when it started.

He continuously expressed his desire to talk to us about his view of the events. We were sure to recognise the difficult balancing act in our role, as we are not there to support him and want to put the victim's perspective at the heart of everything we do. We agreed to a smaller meeting of just 2 people in September, where he would be able to talk about what he had done in a smaller group, as requested by him. The general way he requested this did not make us confident that this would be an insight into reflections of why he did what he did, but rather an attempt to paint himself as a victim of his circumstances.

At that meeting he refused to talk about any of these reflections and his perspective, claiming this was not what he agreed to and that he would need more time to prepare. The discussion then turned to how he could meet the demands, primarily how to find and agree on a perpetrator programme for him to participate in. On this point, X continuously asked us to present him with a perpetrator programme, despite us requesting that he inform himself on the variety of programmes and to let us know about a selection of them. By the end of this we agreed to meet and revisit the personal reflections in December, but organise participation in a perpetrator program in the meantime.

X got in touch with a selection of perpetrator programmes. Sometime later, he informed us that he had made initial contact with a programme (DVIP) that we had agreed to be suitable. We contacted them in order to provide details to get in touch with the victim to make sure to have access to their perspective.

After that, we again did not hear anything from X for months. He did not show up to the December meeting, despite numerous attempts from our side to make contact and one of our members travelling to the agreed place and time just in case of a short-notice attendance. Whilst we regularly wrote to him and attempted to make contact, we only heard back from him a year later, when he announced that he was now ready to talk to us (August 2018). By this point the contact group had existed for almost 3 years and he had still not come close to carrying out any of the demands. Again, we arranged for another meeting a few months later. He did not show up to this either. In the meantime, he had also not responded to people from

the contact group individually messaging him to offer to talk over his reflections and to provide their own critical insight.

More emails from the contact group followed, and only a year later (November 2019) did we get a response. This time X outlined how it would be unsuitable to attend perpetrator therapy, as he considered himself different to the other perpetrators that would be on this programme and because the last 4 years of this process have been hard enough for him. We as a contact group responded outlining why we do not agree with that reasoning. We do not accept that somebody can simultaneously reflect on their perpetration of rape and abuse and also completely ignore simple demands made by the victim of their behaviours and the community supporting these demands. The last communication from X essentially drew a line under his very meagre and mostly feigned collaboration with the process.

### ***Role of perpetrator's surroundings***

The surroundings of a perpetrator will inevitably have a strong impact on their ways of thinking and behaving in relation to their abusive and violent behaviour. If they surround themselves with people who don't ask them to take responsibility for their actions, they are much less likely to do so. It is of utmost importance that people in the perpetrator's environment take a victim-centred approach to their abusive behaviour.

We have witnessed in this process the detrimental effects of people within the perpetrator's surroundings portraying X as a victim of his circumstances and not adopting a victim-centred approach. Mainly, this came from people who would identify as left-wing and feminist, but when it came to incidents of sexualised violence, act without adopting principles that actually support the victim. There were many cases of people, even some of those who were amongst the first to be told about the rape and the planned community accountability process in Birmingham, who instead of supporting the victim in wanting to speak the truth about being raped insisted that the most important thing for them was to just stay "friends" with X. Whilst the process was never about asking people to not stay in

contact with the X, the interpretation of “friends” meant trying to silence the victim, while denying his responsibility for his actions.

In our view the people surrounding X should have actively confronted him about what he did and why he did it, encouraged his active participation and communication with the contact group, and generally should have taken a stance that supports a victim’s right to speak out about their experiences. Instead people wanted to stress the necessity of a “neutral” friend that simply supports the perpetrator. We learned very clearly that talking about sexualised violence and taking an active stance that focuses on the victim rather than the perpetrator is something that meets enormous resistance, even within left wing circles. We do not think that there can be such a thing as a “neutral friend” and the fact that people would rather focus on the “victimhood” of a perpetrator due to the exposure of that person’s abuse and violent behaviour bringing about a certain level of (varying) discomfort shows how supposed “neutrality” in practice only serves to support the perpetrator’s denial of responsibility for what they have done.

We strongly experienced how these ways of (non) engagement with the process by people surrounding X allowed him to deny responsibility. Those around X acted as if speaking out about sexualised violence in itself is an act of indulgence and focused on the potential consequences for him rather than the importance of having a public narrative of sexualised violence. In this case, it allowed X to feign support for the demands made and have a superficial level of participation in the process, whilst only surrounding himself with people that did not actively challenge his narrative with the victim’s perspective and whilst refusing to commit to any actual involvement himself.

### ***Reflections on the experience***

Throughout our conversations with him, X constantly tried to push responsibility away from himself and onto us. He was manipulative in the meetings, acting as if he was willing to do whatever we said as long as we made it clear, but when pressed on doing something he would avoid it, not do it, or pretend we never said it. He

never once took responsibility for his actions to us or told us any of his reflections about his abuse, and instead used the meetings to try and shape things in his favour. It is our impression that he essentially used our meetings and communications with him to see how much of a threat we were, and when he assessed that we were not a threat he cut off contact and then eventually said that he was not going to carry out the demands.

We tried in the process to compromise with X. To try and make him take responsibility for the process and the demands, we offered him the opportunity to propose how he could meet the demands in a way that he found reasonable. In hindsight this flexibility was a mistake. He never accepted the responsibility of defining what the demands would mean, and didn't even stick to the few things we had agreed. Instead the effort at compromise was just used to shape things in X's favour. The manipulative behaviour he used in personal and political settings at the time of the abuse continued into his communications with us.

We don't think that there is a failure on our part to make X accountable or to make him carry out the demands. There are many things that we could have done better but irrespective of what we did, X was simply unwilling to genuinely engage or take responsibility for his abuse and rape. This was the expectation from the support group and people who had previously been involved in contact group work. His initial reaction when confronted with the rape and his initial contacts with the support group were completely centred around himself, and at no point in the process did he stop this self-victimisation or show any genuine empathy or remorse for the person he had raped.

We think the most useful thing to take from this experience is that a contact group should try as far as possible to set very clear demands and expectations for the perpetrator, and resist any attempt to weaken these demands or to accept responsibility for them being fulfilled. Ultimately the only person who can take responsibility for their actions and change is the perpetrator themselves. For us the more important role of the contact group is not rehabilitating the perpetrator, but upholding the victim's perspective and reintegrating the victim in the political or social group. The setting of clear boundaries and the enforcement of these by those

around the perpetrator achieves this, even if they refuse to take responsibility for what they have done.

Another main thought that we want to take from this process is the power of speaking truth both for the victim and also the community and surrounding they are in. Speaking the truth about experiences of rape and sexualised violence is still in itself a strong act of resistance towards a culture that victim-blames, shames and silences those who have been harmed by others. Speaking out about rape is seen as a threat. On a macro-level, it is the threat to a patriarchal status quo, which many activists would at least in spirit claim to reject. On a micro-level within activist groups the perceived threat comes out in fears over the disturbances caused by people speaking out about rape and abuse within their groups. People high up in the open or hidden hierarchies within a political group might push for the information to be kept quiet to avoid fallout, a change in power-dynamics or a sense that the perpetrator is too important for the functioning of the political group to be challenged. Silencing can take the form of people aggressively attacking the person trying to speak out or denying the possibility of the events having happened. It can also mean not listening properly when somebody hints at what has happened to them, at choosing to ignore and often choosing not to ask (not necessarily through bad intentions), particularly if the violence occurs within a relationship, as many people think of these acts as happening within the realm of “the private” which is not to be questioned, sometimes out of fear of receiving a negative response to the inquiry.

In the process, we have witnessed the power of speaking out about rape and sexualised violence. Bringing these conversations into the open and trying to take away the shame, stigma and fear for victims by accepting communal responsibility for their wellbeing and support is the best thing possible. For the contact group, knowing that there was a wide base of people (at least within Birmingham) willing to accept sexualised violence as a reality, talking about it as a real and impactful experience within a person’s life and being supportive in challenging “societal gut reactions” of looking away and silencing was much more important than the work with the perpetrator, as it was this base of people that were willing to put forward

the victim's narrative and this perspective on sexualised violence that lessened the victim's fears in speaking out.

This reflection is not a demand that people affected by sexualised violence speak out about their experiences; rather it is a demand on people in their surroundings to support them to do so should they feel able and willing to share. If this is the case, we believe that it can be very useful to not give in to the urge to keep these events under the radar, to only let small "political" elites know about the perpetrator and their behaviours or to push them aside as "interpersonal" difficulties where it is inappropriate to intervene. Sexualised violence is something that happens many people, and by speaking up about it and creating a safe platform for victims to communicate, we take away some of the power that allows perpetrators to feel safe and legitimate in meeting their own needs by violating another person's body and mind.

## Personal Reflection 1

Initially when I was told by the victim about X raping her multiple times I was shocked but I wasn't surprised. It made sense and filled a lot of gaps.

### ***My Experience of Rape in Relation to this Case***

The years preceding this case I had spent a lot of time exploring my experience of rape at the age of 18 and the subsequent reactions and fall-out of friends and family. In 2012 I started to be open about my experience to friends in Birmingham. In the summer of 2012 X and another friend were the first people in Birmingham (aside from my partner at the time) I told about my experience. Unlike my partner, X had a really strange reaction and tried to change the subject as quickly as possible. He often did this if he didn't want to talk about something but I felt particularly let down by his reaction on this occasion. In hindsight I recognise that my disclosure to him was shortly after the victim had left Birmingham after months of sexual abuse from him.

I reported my case to the police in the spring of 2013 and experienced a very long and drawn out ineffectual investigation. I also spoke to many friends about it and with each new person I spoke to I felt my burden lessen. Some people were initially confused at my openness with regards to my experience because I explicitly told them I didn't mind if they told others. This was contrary to how we often share experiences of rape and sexual assault in demanding our close friends keep this horrific secret to themselves and that they can't disclose it to other people. People then often feel alone in dealing with this burden and some share it with intimate others to help them process it. Before long whispers and rumours are spread and people can see it as 'gossip' which is easily dismissed as such. People get hurt when these rumours travel around and friendships break or are damaged. As I will go into detail later, one of the things I thought that worked well about this process is that the victim and her support group in Germany very deliberately took a different tack with sharing the information so it explicitly wouldn't fall foul of the ways in which information about rape and sexual assault is usually inadvertently disseminated among networks.

In being very open about my experiences I ended up in a situation where a number of female comrades opened up about their experiences of rape and sexual assault too. I was glad we could talk openly about it but I felt unable to deal with the quantity of women who had disclosed their experiences to me. With one such case

I felt like I dealt with it very badly. I was beginning to be open about my experiences and delving into an area of my psyche I had tried to confine to a box buried inside myself. I opened it up at a time when I was also grieving the suicide of a friend and trying to undertake the final year of my undergraduate degree at university. I felt completely unequipped to support all my female friends at the same time as dealing with my issues. All combined amounted to me taking a leave of absence from my final year.

### ***Collective Response to a Collective Problem***

One of the things that I felt was so good about this process was the innately collective way it had been designed. It started a collective conversation about rape and sexual assault in our community and wider society that allowed for a collective response. Unlike all the previous confidential one-on-one conversations I'd had with people beforehand this facilitated a completely collective response where we were all seemingly talking about it at the same time. I no longer felt alone in my experiences of rape nor did I feel alone in helping (and often failing) to support others with their experience of it.

### ***X's Political Behaviour Related to His Sexual Behaviour***

The victim told me when I was in Germany staying with her in the summer of 2015. My initial reaction was one of deep anger and sadness. X was considered a leader of our movement and in a high position of power. I always had a funny relationship with him. He let me into some secrets but kept a lot of things from me. He openly ridiculed his position of power in our organisation and yet at the same time, behind closed doors, also seemed to relish it and use it to a strategic advantage. We were both strategic thinkers and we would often clash on tactics and strategy. He seemed to enjoy many of these debates but when all was said and done he needed to get his way, and he most often did.

When I first met him in 2010 he actively courted me into the movement. He flattered me and (as I recognise in hindsight) groomed me to become a movement actor. He seemed to recognise my passion for justice and determination but also recognised the more negative desires at the time; to feel popular and liked. He saw that I made my own mind up on things but that only suited him when I agreed with him. Once I had figuratively 'risen up the ranks' of the organisation (or at least had a track record of acting in his favour) I was allowed more into the 'inner circle' of decision making in the organisation. Publicly our organisation presented itself as a 'flat' or 'horizontal' body of free-flowing university student activists but out of sight

of our large meetings X would have a cadre or 'vanguard' as he liked to call it where it was agreed beforehand what outcomes he wanted and how we ought to act in order to produce them.

He was always known as being somewhat of a maverick. I at the time had an (ableist) saying that 'he was an environmentalist before he was a mentalist!' Not just in our organisation but socially too he would encourage quite reckless and quite risk taking behaviour, some of which was fun and some of which was definitely very worrying. He seemed to go out of his way to get an adrenaline hit and would encourage or coerce others to do the same. Many of the actions he proposed for us as a movement on campus were risky. Some were politically effective and worth it but other things seemed to be ridiculous or even outright dangerous, disregarding others in the movement. He had the ability to make others do things they might not otherwise have done. He very much recognised his ability to do this. He would often have quite outrageous ideas and plans for actions, some which went well and many that did not. It often felt like it was the women of the movement that had to come in and clean up after the mess he created. In many respects this process has felt like a continuation of this.

The actions that he took in combination with his position of power in the group created an air of martyrdom around him. It seemed he would sacrifice everything for the cause: his freedom (when he went to prison), his health, his grades. He earned a lot of respect for doing this but was also highly conscious of it. He often declared publicly that he didn't want people to look after him or he was undeserving when the movement coalesced around his imprisonment or his suspension from the student union. Yet out of sight he required a well developed body of people around him to support him, enabling him to take a highly prominent and leading role in our movement.

Over time I became more openly critical about his behaviour and I could see the way in which he instrumentalised people in our movement. People were valuable to him in what they could do for the movement and how manipulated by him they could be. As I became more open with my criticism of him he became increasingly confrontational and angry towards me. He would on occasion, shout at me in front of others to delegitimise my points. He saw my open constructive criticism of him and the movement as a danger to the success of the movement and over time shut me out of the 'inner circle' I had been part of before. I remember one conversation with him where he got really angry with me for talking about some of the problems of our movement to some of the first year 'new recruits.' He was really concerned that I would 'put people off' and 'demobilise' people by being openly critical. He was

fixated on maintaining a distinction between the way we appeared to new people and the broader student population with the way we operated behind the scenes.

When the victim told me about her experience I saw the relationship between the way he behaved towards activists in the movement and the way he had behaved towards her.

### ***The Dissemination of the Letter***

She told me about the plan for disseminating the information of his abuse to the community in Birmingham and that a number of people who had already been told about it had refused to help in this task. I was shocked at some of their reactions and disbelief and I committed to help in the furthering of the process into Birmingham as best I could.

With the victim's consent I talked to my partner at the time and he decided to help in the dissemination of information in Birmingham too.

Me and my partner met with four other people in Birmingham that had been told previously. We discussed at length the dissemination of the letter the victim and her support group had written. I was appalled to see that one person began line-by-line critiquing the contents of the letter like it was an academic essay and entirely unreasonable and then refusing to help in any part of the process. They declared they would have nothing to do with this process and five years on they haven't despite maintaining an uncritical friendship with X.

Thus the task of telling over a hundred people in Birmingham and nationally and giving them a copy of the letter initially fell to four people. We deliberately wanted as many people as possible who were to be informed to be told in the shortest amount of time possible as this was part of our clear collective approach. As discussed earlier we didn't want people to be alone in their pain and shock over this information. Rather, we actively wanted to encourage conversation between people about it and to share in the grief that they felt.

I remember me and my partner spending days cycling around Birmingham having many difficult conversations with people one after another and witnessing people's initial reactions. Thankfully as more people were told, more people stepped up to the task of responsibly informing people face-to-face as the dissemination of the letter snowballed. I am very glad that these conversations were deliberately done on a face-to-face basis as it allowed us to be there to support people initially, answer questions and actively challenge a number of initially problematic reactions.

## **People's Reactions**

I found different people's initial reactions varied but fell into distinct and predictable categories.

These included: disbelief, anger, sadness, wanting to know as much detail as possible, looking back on their relationship with X to see if they had witnessed abusive behaviour like this or not.

I felt like my own self-exploration regarding rape and mine and other women's experience of it helped a great deal in dealing with people's reactions.

These included:

- ❑ Recognising that the majority of my female friends had experienced at least one sexual encounter that had amounted to rape.
- ❑ That the majority of women in society had experienced rape or sexual assault.
- ❑ Rapists weren't usually strangers lurking down dark alleys but people known to the victim and in relationships or partnerships with the victim.
- ❑ It wasn't just 'a few bad apples' among men that raped women.
- ❑ The vast majority of men did not recognise these particular sexual experiences as rape even when confronted by the victim.
- ❑ Many men saw their raping of a woman as part of the 'normal' societal script with regards to heterosexual sex.
- ❑ This amounted to a widespread societal problem actively perpetuated by structures in our society.
- ❑ My experience of reporting my experience of rape to the police was at best ineffectual and at worst legitimated the actions of my rapist and his apologisers.
- ❑ Out of the few women who report their experiences of rape to the police, fewer still end up going to court and far fewer still end up in guilty convictions where a jury can prove guilt 'beyond reasonable doubt' in a case that is usually one word against another, often with little evidence.
- ❑ Many survivors don't actually want to see their rapist contained in a prison for a period of time learning nothing and not developing themselves or not feeling empathy towards their victim.
- ❑ Many female survivors I have spoken to wanted their rapist to:

- ❑ Recognise what they have done amounts to rape and sexual violence
  - ❑ Take ownership over it
  - ❑ Empathise with their victim
  - ❑ Atone, learn and positively develop as a result
  - ❑ Ensure they never commit rape or sexual violence again.
- ❑ Our criminal justice system is broken when dealing with instances of sexual violence. It does not serve the interests of survivors or amount to any accountability, justice or learning for the perpetrator or wider society.

One of the most difficult things for me personally has been the reaction of some of the people in the community.

One of the hardest things about coming forward as a victim of sexual violence is the fear over not being believed. We live in a society that often doesn't recognise rape as rape and blames the victim for 'bringing it on themselves.' I was really heartened with the beginnings of the process in Birmingham that the vast majority of people informed believed the victim.

One person however simply refused to believe the victim and I have really struggled with their reaction. Like is often the case in apologising for the perpetrator, they have seemed to engage in a great deal of cognitive and emotional acrobatics to determine all manner of reasons why the victim would speak publicly rather than entertain the idea that he actually raped her.

I have a level of empathy for people who have simply refused to be involved in the process because of how emotionally difficult it is or because they chose to focus their time elsewhere but I have sometimes struggled with this lack of engagement.

I have got very frustrated with people who have said that there should have been no process at all or have seen it as too harsh for X. I believe this shows a lack of empathy for the victim and other victims of sexual assault, effectively arguing that perpetrators should have little or no accountability for their actions.

Aged 18-19 when I told my friends about my experience of rape many downplayed my experience, apologised for the perpetrator and/or put a degree of blame on me. Despite all the problematic reactions of a number of people in this process had I am really heartened by the crew of people who took great positions (even if it took some a while to get there!) and have really come together around this. It may be a level of trauma bonding but I have been very glad that the majority of my valued

friendships survived this and were indeed strengthened by this including my relationship with the victim. I have felt glad for her that she has felt able to come back to visit Birmingham and has had supportive friends in that community. I hope that will continue.

As often happens, as this case and process unfolded other women came forward about their experiences of rape and sexual assault from other men in the community. A number of us created a support group around one victim and attempted to reproduce the process used in this case for them. As things were running in parallel, people involved with this second case found it very difficult to maintain the work required, along with other reasons. It is sad to say but this process around a second case fell apart and that makes me sad.

One critique that I have reflected on with regards to the huge amount of collective and individual effort put in to this case is that under capitalist restrictions of our time there is simply not enough time, energy and people to replicate this process for every single person affected by rape and sexual assault. It is not scalable. Although I am very glad that this process went ahead I recognise it is an exception and not the rule in terms of collective ways of dealing with rape and sexual assault.

### ***Similarities with Other Cases***

In the years before the Birmingham process many in the left in the UK watched the terrible handling of allegations of rape by the Marxist-Leninist vanguardist party the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). I spent a time reading and researching this case for an essay I wrote during the final year of my undergraduate and attributed it to their very hierarchical 'democratic centralist' organisational form. This case in the SWP led many within the organisation to leave en mass, including many who'd been in the party for decades and had stuck with the party through a number of other controversies. These people were sick and tired of the injustice of the handling and cover-up from their party.

Me and a couple of comrades from Birmingham went to a discussion on leftist approaches to dealing with rape and sexual assault at the annual Historical Materialism Conference in London in autumn 2016. We were met with a group of people who had left the SWP over the handling of their case (and others). Despite coming from social movement organisations that had different structures I was struck by how similar our experiences and analysis of our respective cases were when compared to one another. Here were two men in positions of power within their respective organisations believing they could deny the bodily autonomy of

women in their organisations with impunity. In both cases their apologists were more concerned with the political fall-out of their actions coming to light than justice for their victims. In both cases the men were quick to play the victim when they alone were the ones who had chosen their actions to severely harm others.

### ***My Role in the Contact Group***

In autumn 2015 I agreed to be part of the working group tasked with being the ones in contact with the perpetrator and hold him to account. When I put myself forward for this I had believed it would be a lifelong task, that it would be unlikely that the perpetrator would make any positive steps quickly. So long as we both should live I was committed to holding him to account.

This work has not been easy. I was especially anxious before the initial face-to-face meeting we organised with the perpetrator. However once I overcame that mental hurdle it became easier to see him and along with others from the group, I did a further two times.

I did not write the Contact Group Reflections but the text represents many of my thoughts about it very well. It is worth saying that the only reason I believed he had any involvement with us was over fear of being named publicly. On no occasion did he show any recognition for the immense harm he caused the victim and the wider community. I believe he regrets his behaviour only in so much as it amounted to a period of time where he was unable to manipulate and control through means that weren't physically violent and showed a lack of control to himself. I believe he only regretted it because of the negative effect the process has had on his life.

The work in this group was emotionally difficult. Throughout its course two people left because of this and various other reasons and were replaced with two new people from the community involved in the process. I believe the expectations were high for the work required and I don't feel like I met them or contributed as much as other people in the group. However I certainly tried my best and that was all I could do.

### ***Summary***

I am glad this process happened. It is far better that it happened than it didn't. I along with many others learnt a great deal. My hope now is that some of the things we learnt can help inform other processes in the future.

## Personal Reflection 2

I wanted to write my own personal account of the process because I think I did not do the right thing in this case initially. There are lots of reasons for that, which I will explain, but I also think learning about my initial reaction and how I changed my mind would be beneficial to those who might be experiencing a similar type of situation. This is because I think it is likely you will have reactions that are similar to what I had – perhaps motivated differently but of some comparison. I would argue that, for this reason, it is worth preparing for this and also being open to the possibility that people may change their minds – or that they may not.

I was a good friend of X, the perpetrator in this case. I was also a friend of the survivor, Y, though we knew one another less as they lived abroad by the time I was part of the community/activist group. I would say I was a very active member of the group in its latter days but wasn't involved at the time when X was still in a relationship with the survivor. I was also a close friend of X's partner at the time.

When I first received the letter I was shocked. By this time X had been distancing himself from our group and I hadn't seen him in some time. However, I was quick to contact his partner and try to see their perspective in this. In the initial meetings my priority was supporting them. I also met with them several times to discuss what was happening. I couldn't bring myself to communicate with X directly but I did play a part in defending him.

I sent an e-mail to the process group detailing why I thought the terms of X's accountability were not justified and criticising the process. To me now this was not the correct course of action and I do not stand by my statements. I will attempt to explain why I made them, having reflected on this a great deal since then. I hope this won't come across as making excuses for what I did but rather as an explanation.

For context, at the time I received the letter I myself was recovering from having been in a domestically abusive relationship two years prior. I was suffering from PTSD and trauma related mental ill health because of this. I had also not fully reconciled my feelings towards my perpetrator and felt very confused by his actions. This is very common for survivors, I now understand. When you are in love with someone who hurts you there is a strong cognitive dissonance which is difficult to overcome. You want to believe the best in that person despite them giving you little reason to.

I now work with survivors of domestic abuse and have a better understanding of the topic through this and also my own participation in group therapy. At the time I had not properly accessed any therapy to deal with these feelings.

My feelings, then, towards the perpetrator of my abuse were deeply ambivalent. I felt anger and distress but I also desperately sought to understand WHY he had behaved in this way. This included typical things like mental ill health, his own history of trauma and perhaps even his ignorance to the hurt he caused me.

I mention this, not to centre myself, but to explain how I conflated the cases in my mind in some ways. X was also a friend and someone I cared about. I wanted to believe there was some explanation for his behaviour and he also had not meant it or been ignorant of it somehow. This seemed important to me in ways that were not immediately obvious to me at the time. Making excuses for X, in some ways, was also making excuses for my own abuser.

Beyond this, there was also a sense of loyalty to X and his partner. I think this is very common in these cases and something one is very likely to come across. We do not wish to believe ill of our friends even when we have a social justice mind-set. When it is presented to us in such an immediate context it is far more difficult to reckon with than in the abstract. Things like this can be socially awkward for us and disrupt our own image of safety in our community. Some people deal with this by denying or minimising it.

However, at no point did I disbelieve the account of the victim. My behaviour was minimising, justifying X's action in a certain way. Over time I began to recognise this. I began to recognise it only after losing the friendship of some over that time, or the trust of others. But the most useful people in helping me to realise my mistake were those who stayed close to me but did not fear challenging me. They did this each time the topic was broached but did not tend to imply that my view made me 'bad', rather that I was misguided. I believe this method was effective for me, as a survivor myself, and could be useful for others who may be doing what I did for similar reasons.

Eventually I spoke to the victim, the survivor in this process, and I explained why I had behaved in this way and apologised to them. I tried to begin attending meetings again – this was initially met with a level of hostility and distrust which I could understand. However, as time went on I was allowed to become a part of the process group and attended meetings regularly. I worked, also, on the text on this website in the intervening years.

This process helped me to learn and develop a lot of principles which I carry over in my day to day life, work and organising. Through educating myself I learnt that the primary reason for domestic abuse and sexual abuse is the need for power and control, as well as a sense of entitlement. This is not a dominant or prevailing view in our society. I also learnt that, counter to what we are led to believe, it is important that we do pay attention and intervene in our friend's relationships if we believe something may be wrong. It is not always 'just their business' and the only way we can support survivors is to be unafraid to challenge these behaviours in a way that centres the survivor and their safety.

As the popular union phrase goes: An injury to one is an injury to all!

## Personal Reflection 3

There is a lot I have learned from being a part of this community accountability process. I would not be the same person if the process had not taken place. I am incredibly glad that through all the difficulties and pain that is involved in engaging in the struggle against sexual violence we were able to build something important.

The process helped me to name my own experience of sexualized violence rape. Being socialized as a woman in our society for me to some extent meant that I needed somebody else close to me to talk about the possibility of rape being committed by somebody you know or even had been intimate with before. For me, it meant taking two years to realise and accept that it is not just a forgivable mistake to be woken up by somebody having anal sex with you after you fell asleep next to them. It took me two years to accept that it wasn't just the fact that I had made it clear before that event that I did not want to have anal sex which made me feel so strange. It took somebody else opening up about rape to make me consciously engage with the fact I had an ongoing injury that required surgery and to acknowledge the flashbacks I had tried to disengage from. It took somebody else to be so brave to take up some space and demand for some questions to be asked for me to be able to consider that what had happened was rape and that it deserved some time and care from myself and others around me.

It is absolutely unbelievable that we live in a world where I can be socialised in a way where my “noes”, non-consensual penetration, resulting injuries, flashbacks and PTSD lead to a situation where I felt that it was just a weird episode of a short-lived relationship. And sadly, I know that I am not the only one who as a result of a group of people talking about dynamics in relationships, sexual encounters and experiences with friends and partners started to question a lot of what had happened in these areas of our lives. We would have all been pretty able to give you a low-down on sexism, patriarchy and intersecting oppressive forces and we were all involved in activism of various kinds and honestly pretty savvy. But it was almost like we were raised in a society where the default is still to blame yourself when you are the victim of sexual violence or to assume that somehow, despite cognitively ever thinking it, particularly men's needs somehow have a higher status than your own. I am super grateful that there is a strong discourse developing and for all the work mainly women and victims of sexualized violence and oppression are putting into it over decades and decades. I am super grateful for the victim who initiated this process for allowing me to raise a bar I would have happily applied to other people to myself.

Talking about rape and sexual violence brings up a lot of things for people. For many, it unwittingly seems to bring up an almost unconscious urge to forget and not talk about it. Almost like you acknowledge the topic from the other corner of the room with an awkward nod and then hastily turn back to your previous conversation. That is annoying, because it leaves people that really need to talk about it or need to understand something or to have somebody tell them that in fact they are sane, with very few people willing or able to do that. But even more heart wrenching is the experience of so many people reacting to the uncomfortable feeling that a conversation about rape brings with it by turning on the person bringing it up. In so many stages of this process we were made to feel like this is something that shouldn't be talked about openly, like this is a private matter, that talking about it means taking up undeserved space.

In some ways it felt like maybe politically we are now at a stage where many people grant a person that has experienced sexual violence to take on victimhood. Throughout the process, it felt more acceptable to have conversations about the fact that somebody was hard done by and as a result suffering. Weirdly enough, many people seemed so awkwardly uncomfortable about the aspects of the process linked to demands and being loud and taking up space and asking for support from a community. Asking others to take some responsibility. Almost like when it takes a village to raise a rapist and then it takes a village to support a victim and maybe teach each other about not being rapists and respecting each other's personal psychological and bodily boundaries.

Another powerful thing was how the process, the discussions and the communal effort to take sexual violence seriously - and to look at ourselves and our political and friendship group through a new lens - allowed for a major shift in discourse. Through a lot of hard work and many committed people, sexual violence was now a topic discussed as casually as its acts are committed. I and many others learned to speak about getting raped without major shame or fear of being judged. There was a space being carved and shaped in our community where many of us could fit better, with some more of our own stories being uncovered and accepted and valued. I truly believe that this space and right to acknowledge openly how many of us had had experienced sexual violence and to not be made to feel doubted, ashamed or fearful about repercussions of talking about it and demanding change was and is one of the most powerful things that this process created on a large level. I sometimes notice that when I enter circles where no such discussions have ever taken place, it can feel awkward and uncomfortable. There can be a feeling of looming threat of not knowing if you can bring your whole story or if that part of you has to stay hidden, quiet, ashamed and hurt.

Honestly, this was one of my biggest realisations in this process: Getting raped and all the societal messaging of shame, blame and the need to fragment your experience and at best be allowed to be a forever broken victim does totally mess with your head. I do not think that that can be undone. In my example, just as after 8 years I still have a physical injury as a result of rape, the impact on my sense of self is never gonna go away. But talking about sexual violence, having a victim-centred approach and a community that is open to talking about sexual violence, it's responsibility in fostering violent dynamics and taking it seriously, changes one's ability to integrate such a shit experience into one's life story and to become an active agent in working through the impact and fighting the causes.

Acknowledging that something like this will always be a part of the self makes it hard to believe that throughout the process there were many people out there defending the perpetrator. Who said that it is punishment to talk about this openly. Who said asking things of the perpetrator was too much. Who were questioning from day one when the attempts to hold the perpetrator accountable for their actions would stop, because you wouldn't want the perpetrator's whole life to be shaped by these acts. So, I guess my point is that it is somehow easier to accept for many that a person who was intentionally damaged and traumatised by somebody who placed their own needs drastically over somebody else's will have to just deal with the consequences forever, than to accept that for the perpetrator to be accountable and work on their mindset it might also take a good chunk of time. I could write about this for ages because it angers me. However, I have limited time and funnily enough it is also mainly people affected by sexual violence who give a shit about it and invest their time and physical and mental health into working against this oppressive system and the people and mindsets that uphold it. It is the people most affected by it who in my experience tried to see this through the most, who supported each other, who created spaces for discussion, who looked out for each other and who tried to learn and change together. That is exhausting and I wish that hadn't been the case. But until that changes I am sure that we'd all rather tire ourselves out supporting each other, carving out little spaces and challenging patriarchy and sexism etc. than to not have been part of building a little bit of an alternative for victimsurvivors.

## Personal Reflection 4

My own involvement in this community accountability process against sexual violence began in September 2015 and remained pretty much constant until this website went online in June 2020. Though the process was more or less active at different times during this period I can say that it was a physically, mentally, and emotionally draining experience throughout and I stand by the conclusions reached in the group reflection. In this personal reflection I would like to elaborate on the reasons for my own involvement and some of my feelings regarding the left wing community in Birmingham. I would also like to outline what I believe the value of this website is and draw attention to a few key points which I believe should be considered by anyone else who attempts to be involved in a community accountability process.

### **1) My involvement in the early days of this process**

When I received the letter back in September 2015 I was still involved in our free education group and my primary political engagement was as a Marxist campaigning for free education. I will admit that at this time my understanding of feminism was relatively undeveloped and my understanding of sexual violence as a political and social phenomena was practically non-existent. I knew enough about the incidences to know that a bad man had committed a series of bad acts but I did not yet understand this in relation to how social norms and values pertaining to gender and sexuality had facilitated these acts. Likewise, I did not understand how the dynamics of our group and the broader community enabled these acts nor how these dynamics were related to broader social structures such as the state and the universities. I think the fairest and most appropriate way for me to characterise my views at the beginning of this process is to say that I understood the issues of sexual abuse and violence in terms which were moral but not sociological or political.

Following from this, my primary motivation for becoming involved during the early days of the process was born out of the fact that two of my longest standing friends and comrades, both of whom were key figures in this process and were involved in the contact group work, had been visibly shaken by the revelations. At this time I felt that my involvement may be helpful because it would help them feel less isolated and as such may have made it easier for them to be involved. Put in simple and straightforward terms, my motivation at this time was primarily interpersonal, born of a bond, rather than an abstract and impersonal commitment to a

Marxist-Feminist praxis. If they had not been involved it is entirely possible that I wouldn't have been either. As such I think it is fair for me to say that in the early days of this process I saw myself in a supportive role to these two people though I would not have described it in these terms at that time. This was compounded by the fact that I had only met the survivor once or twice in my life and had a weak bond with Ed because I knew him as a comrade in the movement but was barely acquainted with him outside of political activity. Further to this, at this stage I was not sure how I could actually contribute to the process because what we should be doing was not obvious to any of us. In short, my motivation for being involved early on was less ideological or practical than it was interpersonal.

## **2) *The Left in Birmingham (2015-2020)***

Time changes us all and this process has changed me. My understanding of sexual violence as a social and political phenomena is far more developed than it was back in September 2015 as is my understanding of the dynamics of our free education group and the broader community. At one time our group had been a force on campus which despite its outsider status and minority appeal was still able to achieve something and was still dynamic enough to be worth putting time into. However by the time the 2015/16 academic year had started it was a dying horse which deserved to be put out of its misery and as more people left this is precisely what happened. As for the broader community which existed in September 2015, it is my view that this community has been recomposed so many times since that the left wing community in Birmingham is now unrecognizable to me. At one time I bemoaned the loss of this community but from the perspective of summer 2020 I am actively glad that the community that I knew and felt a part of no longer exists. The demise of that community simply means that many of us who were involved have carved out a life for ourselves, have been relatively successful in the pursuit of our own interests, and have either found other communities to belong to or have been able to integrate into the left community in Birmingham as it stands today. This does create difficulties for community accountability processes like this one but at the same time life should be dynamic and not stagnant.

On a darker note, I am certain that not every story has been positive and that some of those who 'dropped out' of the Birmingham left community over the years were not able to establish themselves elsewhere. I am certain that this is the case because as referred to in the article mental and physical health issues have always been widespread within our community and if I am being honest the community

has not always done a great job of looking after its most vulnerable members. However, moralising and guilt have no place in these discussions. In the context of austerity politics and the decimation of welfare communities are being put under increasing pressure to provide support to their members. The demand from the state is increasingly that sick people take care of each other and that the buck stops with them. Blaming sick people for not being able to consistently provide support misses the point and ignores violence which is structural and institutional. For support to be beneficial it must consist of healthy practices and be provided consistently, both of which are very difficult if not impossible to do by what is essentially a community of volunteers. As such, there is nothing inherently liberatory about the materialisation of a community and this is especially the case for those who are most marginalised and for whatever reason not fully accepted into left wing communities.

The left wing community which existed in Birmingham in 2015 is now dead and for the sake of everyone who was involved I am glad that it is.

### **3) Lessons Learnt**

It is my view that, amongst other things, the group reflection presented here elaborates a well-considered critique of the horizontalist mode of organising which we adopted in our free education group and which was commonplace in the free education movement at universities in England during the 2010s. As such, though the attempt to hold Ed accountable to the community in Birmingham can be considered to have failed this does not exhaust the aims of this process nor does it invalidate the time and energy which those involved put into it. In addition to a critique of our free education group, many of the difficulties associated with the process itself are elaborated clearly in the writing found on this website and I am confident that the lessons which the left wing community in Birmingham will be able to take from this process will be invaluable. A world where all people can live without fear of being subjected to abuse and violence, whether sexual or otherwise, is a worthwhile goal for the left to aim towards and beginning in our own communities is a difficult but essential moment in working towards this.

In accordance with this I would like to mention what I believe are a few key takeaway points from the last 5 years of this process. I hope that these will provide useful insights for anybody else on the left who attempts to get involved in a

community accountability process, whether the issue is sexual violence or some other form of abuse.

***a) The Left would benefit from more philosophy***

As mentioned in the group reflection, a large part of the work which this process involved meant that our reflective capacities were tested by the questions which we attempted to answer in our discussions. Given that many of us involved in the process had been in our free education group and the surrounding left wing community in Birmingham for several years it would have been very easy for our conversations to get bogged down in the details of particular actions, campaigns, and the various happenings which had occurred over the years. Philosophical perspectives which underpinned many of our discussions helped us with exploring the more general trends in the dynamics of our social and political groupings and this allowed us to explore topics such as instrumentalism, oppression, state power, recognition and accountability. These topics ultimately proved to illuminate the situation which had emerged in our community. Without these I fully believe that we would have reproduced a liberal account of sexual violence grounded in simplistic moral terms (i.e. abusive behaviour as bad acts carried out by bad people) rather than one which tries to understand sexual violence as socially contingent and socially situated (i.e. abusive behaviour as acts enabled by practices which were normalised within our community).

***b) Be prepared for a community accountability process to test your communication skills and your relationships with people***

Any community accountability process like this one will test your communication skills. This will vary massively depending on the history which you share with others involved in the process and on what your own particular communication needs are (i.e. what pattern of strengths and weaknesses you have in regard to communication). As such it isn't really of any great help for me to say more on this point other than to say that processes like this one can only work as well as the people involved are able to talk to each other. This has led me to the conviction that political theory narrowly defined cannot provide enough of a perspective on our social practices. Indeed, I now believe that in our case we would have benefited

from more knowledge of the apparently apolitical discipline of communication theory. An outside perspective on how we communicated at both the group and one on one interpersonal levels could have been provided by knowledge of communication theories.

This would have been particularly helpful for us because, as mentioned in the group reflection, our free education group had historically been a motley crew of Marxists, anarchists, environmentalists, feminists of various tendencies, Labour Party people, and many others who at times just had thoroughly bizarre views. As such, our group was not politically coherent in any formal or even informal way and so we were not able to begin our discussions from a place of political unity. There were at times clear differences between those involved on a variety of issues and in this respect the core group involved in the process can be considered to be a coalition of individuals rather than as a more organised collective. A knowledge of communication theory would have been helpful when navigating these political differences. Ultimately there was a contradiction within our process; at one and the same time the limits of what we could deal with as a group was a recurring theme in our discussions whilst reaching a consensus on what these limits were was difficult and arduous work which strained our interpersonal relationships with each other. This contradiction demonstrates that more conversation does not immediately materialize in better understanding and that a shared theory of communication would benefit community accountability processes like this one.

### ***c) The Supportive Others Need To Be Organized!***

In the section of the group reflection entitled 'Limiting Factors : Support and Care' reference is made to 'supportive others'. Supportive others refers to the broader layer of engagement which many people created throughout this process. The intimate partners, friends, and housemates of those directly involved in the community accountability process offered their support throughout in various ways. The ability of those offering support to communicate with each other about their own difficulties supporting us during the process could have ultimately helped create a more stable and coherent left-wing community in Birmingham. The growing incoherence of our community became apparent shortly after the beginning of this process when our free education group ended in November 2015. Indeed, no longer having an activist group at the university, combined with the fact that many of those involved most central to our group had graduated from the university and 'aged out' of the free education movement, meant that our

community became more fragmented as there were fewer focal points for its activity. The focal point of supportive work could have helped make our community more defined while those more directly involved were attending meetings and forming working groups.

There is little to be said here about the practicalities of what the supportive others organizing themselves would entail because it would have to be worked out by those involved and in our case it never happened. As such it is only possible to speculate and given the way our process played out I believe that this supportive work would have been shaped by the same dynamics of in-group/out-group distinctions and informalised social relations which characterised the activities of both our free education group and this community accountability process.. The responsibility for organising and coordinating this work would have to be worked out by those involved in the broader layer of supportive others involved in the process. Communication between the broader layer of supportive others and those directly involved can be easily facilitated through technologies such as mobile phones and email. In addition, the previously mentioned knowledge of communication theory could help facilitate community wide discussion about accountability processes so that the communist motto of 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs' can be actualised in theory and materialised in practice.

#### **4) *The value of this website***

Finally I would like to close with a few words on what I believe the value of this website is. I was not involved in the contact group at any point in this process and so my main contribution was being involved in discussions and contributing to the article which appears on the section of this website called 'Response'. following approximately two years of discussions we began meeting to write the article in July 2017. Though it is It is always difficult to pin point at exactly what point your views on a matter have changed I can say that by the time we formed the article writing group my perspective had broadly changed from the morality based one which I had at the beginning of this process to the socio-political one informed by Marxist-Feminism which I have now. In addition to my ideological development during the first two years of the process the founding of the article writing group gave me a practical opportunity to use my writing skills to further the aims of the process.

As mentioned earlier in this reflective piece, it is my view that the article which we produced presents a well articulated critique of the horizontalist mode of organising as it played out within the British free education movement with a particular focus on sexual violence. In as much as this is the case, I hope that the article is able to find an audience amongst those on what might be called the extra-parliamentary left so that they may begin a process of learning from our case, discussing the issues and actually making the changes which are required to create an extra-parliamentary left in which all people regardless of gender, class, race, sexual orientation, or disability can organise without fear of being subjected to violence and abuse. More broadly, I hope that this reinvigoration of extra-parliamentary left wing praxis can have a broader influence on the left generally. Groups and organizations which organize within the electoral system may not find our experience as useful due to fundamental differences in the way that they do things but this does not exonerate them from examining their own practices. Those involved in the parliamentary left (whether they be a Trotskyist group, a left wing faction within the Labour Party, or some other electoral force) evidently have time, energy and motivation enough to engage in factional disputes, argue about minor differences in policy, and disagree over increasingly niche and obscure procedural processes which are shrouded in mystery to anyone not involved and boring to anyone who is but isn't sufficiently obsessed with the group/organisation or paid enough to be interested. After nearly 8 years of being involved in left wing organising I can say without fear of contradicting myself that if groups and organisations (whether parliamentary or extra-parliamentary) have the time, energy and motivation to fight over petty matters and argue about subcultural esoterica they have the capacity to work towards institutionalising structures which stamp out abusive and violent behaviour.

In addition to the contribution that this website can make to discussions on the left, I believe that in light of the current (as of June 2020) reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement the conclusions which we have reached as a result of this process can make a contribution to discussions regarding defunding the police and transforming our justice system. This is a discussion to be had not just on the left but throughout society as a whole and our attempt to hold Ed accountable and get justice for the person who he harmed means that we are more aware of what community based attempts at justice can achieve in the current situation. We have achieved what we were able to within the limits presented by the circumstances which we were working within and hopefully future attempts by others to hold perpetrators to account will be more successful because the circumstances will be more favourable. Factors which limited our attempt at justice are outlined in the

section of the article called 'Limiting factors' and should be considered when discussing defunding the police and how the justice system should change in order to adapt to this defunding.

Social reproduction is praxis. One-nil to Marx!

A comrade

## Personal Reflection 5

This process has been one of the most difficult projects that I have taken part in. It has affected me in ways I couldn't have imagined. Now five years later it's proving to be difficult to put my feelings and thoughts down on paper and just as a disclosure, I'm not a very eloquent writer, and there may be quite a few mistakes, sorry.

I went into this process with a lot of my own baggage. I had been sexually assaulted when I was 19, I had gone to the police, he was charged with rape and sexual assault, to which I had to testify in court, and finally it had ended with no conviction as the 4 judges that deliberated on my case found no "malicious motivation" on behalf of the perpetrator. Throughout the two years that it took for the state to drag me through this process, all our mutual friends turned their backs on me and continued their friendship with my perpetrator seemingly unfazed. It took me a long time to recover, and what I found surprisingly painful was the betrayal I felt from my community, who couldn't recognise and see what had happened to me as real and worth acting on. I felt isolated but I moved to university and had the opportunity to make new friends. I made a lot of friends through the student political group called Defend Education.

I trusted my new friendship group.

Our politics aligned and we had come together because we agreed on what behaviour was moral, and what wasn't. These new friends were feminist and were outraged when I told them how my old friends had just continued their friendship with my perpetrator unfazed. This was important for me, as it helped validate my experiences of trauma.

So, at 23, after 4 years on working on my own recovery I was told that a friend of mine, someone I liked and held in high esteem, who I had opened up to about my own abuse and who had helped me get extenuating circumstances from university, had this whole time, either abused and raped his girlfriend, or effectively silenced her.

I found out just before the letter was distributed, because a close friend of mine was in the first group tasked with disseminating the letter and each person in that group could tell one person for emotional support. I was that emotional support.

I was so angry that I had been put in the same position my perpetrator had put all my old friends in. It seemed so simple to me, support the affected comrade, legitimize her experience and make sure she's ok. I found out that no one in

Birmingham had sent her messages of support and this outraged me further. I didn't know her, but I felt deeply that I could relate to her experience.

The group that were tasked with disseminating the letter had huge rifts in it by the time I knew anything. There had been arguments, someone had left the group calling it a smear campaign and from what I understand the people chosen to be part of this group positioned as either were friends of the affected comrade, friends of the perpetrator ("critical friends") or friends of the perpetrators current girlfriend.

I don't know too much about this time, but it was messy, emotionally charged, and difficult. All I know id here say, and I don't feel like it is my place to comment further. All I could do was try and support my friend and wait until the wider community were told.

I wasn't present at the first meeting as I was abroad, but my attendance started from the "welfare meeting" set up a couple of weeks later. This, like many left-wing student meetings, ended up being very procedural and frustrating for those who wanted to talk about how everything was emotionally affecting them. This was a constant problem. Do we assume everyone can talk openly about their emotions or do we create structures and spaces so that these discussions can happen? We chose the latter, which retrospectively assumed that people in the community don't trust one another, and don't feel safe enough to discuss these matters openly. Although after one of you turns out to be a rapist, why would there be this trust?

We set up an email, came up with rules on how to organise in a manner that would make everyone feel as able as possible to be involved, we had rotating agenda groups, a coordination group, anything we could think of to horizontally organise without forming an informal hierarchy.

My first disappointment was when attendance immediately dropped. We sent out emails about meetings to around 60 people, and less that 10 showed up. We had organised an elaborated organisational structure to make people feel able to engage, we had rotating groups, agenda groups, tasked changed to try and fight against the formation of informal hierarchies whilst still organising horizontally. We organised meetings at the university keeping in mind accessibility needs, we emailed the agenda 2 days before the meeting giving people time to read it and add to it. I was putting all my time into ensuring that people felt that they could engage.

Many just found it too difficult, with other things going on their personal lives, the meetings were tense, they were formal, anxious, with welfare go rounds as the only form of emotional sharing, which was awful in its own way as you'd share into

this empty ether, with no real response. Then the meeting would immediately jump into a complex conversation of patriarchal structures in society. And informal hierarchies of some form did develop, I was on the coordination group the whole time, as everyone else wanted to step down before me and no one wanted to volunteer to take my place. I was in this position for 5 years which inevitable gave me informational power. I could organise meetings, people knew about my involvement, and came to me with grievances.

We carried on with dwindling numbers, the lack of engagement from many I considered friends, affected these friendships. It was all I could think about. We had an opportunity to work together to figure out how to organise in a way that doesn't end in sexualized violence, I could not understand why people weren't keener to get involved.

A contact group was set up after 6 months. I wasn't part of this, but worked closely with people who were, and as I was the only one in Birmingham who had maintained friends who were still friends with the perpetrator, I often found myself using these social connections to try to mediate between the contact group and the perpetrators "critical friends".

I feel that those that chose to be in contact with the perpetrator and state their involvement as being a "critical friend" were somewhat in an impossible situation. As maintaining friendship is easily seen as rape apologist, but this guy is manipulative as fuck. He knows what to say to get his way, and has on many occasions given 101 different reasons for why he hasn't gone to a therapist, or told anyone politically or personally about what he had done.

He chose a type of therapy that was inappropriate, and when he was told that the process group would not support this, he used this as a reason not to seek any therapy at all. He argued that telling people about his past would put them at risk of emotional turmoil, and it was our responsibility to ensure those people had support. He had effectively victimised himself in this situation, and it's fucked up, but my point is that he is manipulative, as many abuses are, and the concept of a "critical friend" is a failed one, created so that perpetrators can insulate themselves being held accountable.

Sometimes I feel like this is a term thrown around and politically we all feel like it is part of some moral obligation to be that "critical friend", but its fucking hard, and honestly sometimes I feel bad that I didn't feel able ever to meet up with him and be critical and other times I'm so fucking angry that people decided to be his friend without accepting the cold hard fact that he raped someone repeatedly. The pressure needs to be constant, every time you meet you need to have those

uncomfortable conversations: “Hey have you told everyone that you’re politically organising with that you used your past political power to excuse rape? Have you signed up to therapy yet?” Its shit, and it's exhausting, and the person you should be angry at is the perpetrator. But who am I to say anything? My perpetrator said to our friends he'd get therapy – that shut everyone up. (He never did)

After 7 months I was asked by a few friends of mine who were a part of another support group to do one task for them – give this other perpetrator a letter written by this support group.

This letter detailed his actions and notified him of the existence of a support group, and it had a few demands – maintain contact with the group, get therapy etc.

I was chosen, because of my activity in all the meetings, my politics on this matter and because I knew both the affected comrade and the perpetrator, but I wasn't close to either. So, I somewhat naively thought that was all I had to do, that I'd do my bit and concentrate on this process and the university course I was on at the time. I completely underestimated how difficult this task would be, and how responsible I would feel for the wellbeing of the affected comrade, and by doing this I became inextricably tied to this other process. This process was a lot smaller, consisting of less than 10 people, many whom were already organising around the community accountability process detailed on this website. It was also all a secret and attempted to be all three groups in one – victim support, community accountability, and perpetrator contact group. This ended badly, the victim didn't feel supported, the perpetrator moved away, and the small community just felt like everything they were doing was causing more harm, many were holding themselves accountable to impossible standards in an impossible environment. With people's personal problems overlapping (I was studying to be a teacher and had to drop out as I could not deal with the responsibility) the process collapsed, and many friendships fell apart.

This situation reminded me of the sensation I had after I was assaulted, the more I spoke out, the more people would come tell me their stories of sexual violence in confidence, the worse the world felt and the more difficult it was to process my own assault.

Don't get me wrong, I'm happy I got to share those moments with my friends, and that in those times we felt heard and could share our stories.

I feel it is important to speak out when you feel you can but finding out that rape is a common denominator between you and a lot of the people around you is overwhelmingly depressing and demoralizing.

When we collectivise the processing of trauma from sexual violence, we are collectivising certain aspects victims experience in their recovery. Being part of a support group around sexual violence makes you aware of all the other sexual violence. This can be overwhelmingly depressing and demoralizing.

Due to the pressure that we were all putting on ourselves, the dwindling attendance at meetings, we decided to organise meetings less frequently, from twice a month to once a month. The capacity of the group lessened steadily from there. There was less coherency in the discussion, in attempts to create some form a structure to the discussion we came up with a list of questions, or agenda points that we would work through slowly, but we didn't get far, and many in the group felt ready to start writing.

I disagreed as we had only started going through this giant bank of questions, so we compromised, those who wanted to start writing could, and each month at the meetings we would discuss what had been written, those who weren't ready to put pen to paper or didn't feel they had the writing skills could still engage in discussion, and those who wanted to produce a written piece of work could get started. Thinking about it now I think that was a lot of pressure to put on my fellow comrades to have a monthly meeting scrutinizing what they had written. Although, maybe due to that pressure, these 'editorial' meetings never materialized, in the first 'editorial' meeting we were told that the draft that had been written was too long and too underdeveloped to be read and properly discussed in a group setting, and that we should cease all meetings until this written piece was finalized and ready.

I wanted to engage with this process and felt that any opportunity to do so – unless I started writing – had been taken away from me. I am not a confident writer; I am bilingual and written language is definitely not my strong suit. So, for all intense and purpose I had quit this process, I was angry and frustrated and gave up, telling people to get in contact once they had finished their “masterpiece” never really trusting it would happen.

It wasn't too long till people in the writing group started quitting.

I can organise meetings, so I asked to join helped organise some meetings, and keep up some level of motivation, although to be honest I had have written very little of this article, and all the credit should go to my friends and comrades.

I'm writing this reflection late, the decision on whether to name the perpetrator or not, was the last meeting I organised, I personally think it a good idea to name the perpetrator, also more importantly I think everyone who worked in making this

website possible had the right to be consulted. This like everything was dragged out and prolonged, but I am happy that finally we have been able to make have something to show for the last five years.

This shit is toxic, it makes you question everyone's motivations constantly, you lose trust in the people around you and feel like you're not trusted either. To add to this people were smoking a lot and there was a lot of paranoia – which definitely didn't help. So if you're reading this and thinking about starting a community accountability keep that in mind.

I have accused my comrades of treating this purely as a political exercise and not seeing the emotional labour of fighting to preserve a community so that we could say yes, we together experienced that, held ourselves accountable and transformed as a community. I do believe that people who have been part of this still see themselves as members of the “left” but I wouldn't necessarily say that the community still exists – although I do believe we would have all grown apart eventually anyway.

If I had to go back, I don't know what I'd be able to do differently. I was harsh and outspoken and angry. I wish I could just list things here, but I can't as every time I do, I remember our reasoning and our limited capacities, so despite everything I believe if I went back in time I'd still do it all again.

Lastly, I just want to say that we never gave ourselves the space to mourn the person we all thought the perpetrator was, if that makes sense. I was shocked when I heard, and I despise anyone who says shit like “I'm not that surprised this person seemed a bit off etc” like fuck off. It makes me as a victim feel like it's my fault like, I didn't have good judgement of character. Its ok to be shocked, its ok to feel betrayed by a friend, and to be sadden and angry about it. Like I thought he wasn't capable of doing something like this, and it makes me sad to know that he is.

-Sorry about any spelling errors-

## Personal Reflection 6

### ***What does it mean to be an accountability process?***

I was part of this group 4 or 5 years ago. What I remember mostly reflects the loudest voices which stick out sharpest in my memory and should not be taken as an accurate reflection of what we covered. But since they also typically sway impressions and decision making at the time, I think it worth commenting on those dynamics I do remember.

Accountability processes necessarily bring the trauma which sits among us to the surface. Creating activist spaces which are capable of holding this trauma and working with it rather than around it is something we need to do in order to begin to undo capitalist indoctrination which causes us to view each other only as partial humans. Especially since a majority of this trauma is produced by capitalism itself. To breach this knowledge gap, we need to understand that the frameworks most of us are familiar with to understand these experiences have been produced by the medical industrial complex in the service of capitalism.

I learned a huge amount from taking part in this process and having reflected on it since. As activists I believe what we commit to is doing better, and sometimes the things we need to learn will feel insurmountable. But there are plenty of resources from which we can learn and I hope others doing this work have easier access to them than we did.

### ***Why was I there? Initial Response***

I was angry when I received the letter. Not at the perpetrator nor at the injustice of what had been done to the victim. No, though I hadn't known it at the time, my rage at my own experiences of sexual violence had finally bubbled to the surface in a misdirected outpouring. The last vestiges of control I'd had over how to engage with my own rapes were being ripped from me as someone else's pain was unveiled, and the shadow of a truth I'd successfully suppressed for almost 2 years loomed large in an unexplored corner of my psyche.

Whether it's our own or someone else's, we don't get to choose if trauma happens to us, and we don't get to choose when or how it comes up either. Just as brutalising violations of will happen outside of your control so too is their exposure necessarily unpredictable. With hindsight then, it's perhaps unsurprising that our accountability process unfolded much like one might expect a natural disaster; one

for which none of us were prepared nor for which we had the resources (knowledge, material, emotional, experiential, spiritual) necessary to grapple with it.

I'd known neither the victim nor the perpetrator in this case and had been only tangentially aware of the group's activities. I found myself frequently questioning my right to be there and wondering what it was I actually hoped to get out of it. On the surface, I was there to feed in thoughts and feelings from those of my friends who'd themselves been subject to the abusive organising tactics of the group. I now understand that I was also subconsciously seeking something for my own experiences of rape, despite not yet recognising what had really happened to me.

Initially unaware of this deeper motivation, the process acted as an intermediary for me to have some form of both input and outlet through which to assimilate those experiences. Like many others, I was able to channel that previously unexposed and mischaracterised rage through the process itself; as something with the potential for healing and change and with little alternative available, this seemed like an appropriate place for it. But it also uncovered a wellspring of guilt and shame that within the structure of the group I found myself unable to speak about.

This community accountability process revealed parts of myself that I didn't know were there, and I have no doubt it did the same for others. *I was not prepared for what it would bring to the surface* and nor were we equipped to navigate these experiences together. I was not alone among the people who joined this accountability process who had had our own previous experiences of sexual assault. Nor were we the only ones who found it difficult, confusing, and at times overwhelming to share in the depth of realisation that thorough elaboration of those experiences, and their contextualisation, necessarily brings to light.

### **Set up of the Group**

As a group of people, we'd shared only loose ties with one another beforehand. And as is common for cases of sexual violence, whatever trust we'd had in each other before, now lay in tatters. The convergence of so many angry, untrusting, and traumatised (be it directly or indirectly) people in need of varying kinds and degrees of support made for a fraught environment. One in which someone always had something to say which created a space where people felt unheard; our vulnerability was excised from the room, protected by layers of either righteous anger or detached analysis.

Attempts to set up concurrent support systems for victims/survivors went nowhere and avenues for emotional expression embedded within the process itself, which were intended to circumvent harmful norms, were ineffective with few of us feeling comfortable to share our feelings. As a victim myself I found these dynamics distressing, and I found it difficult to make peace with our inability to accommodate people who wished to contribute but who found the atmosphere too stressful (mostly those with mental health conditions or their own experiences of sexual assault).

These are fragile beginnings for any endeavour. This coupled with residue of the attitudes and organising tactics which had caused harm to so many people, and enabled this case to go unnoticed and unheard for so long, led to significant oversights in how we decided to organise the process and inevitably reproduced the very norms we were there to unpack.

### ***Orientation of the Group***

Rape reveals even the trustworthy to be untrustworthy, including the self whose trust was misplaced. This makes seeing a clear path forward difficult and stepping into the unknown a requirement. In *Pleasure Activism*, adrienne maree brown writes, “Most of us resist change we didn’t spark. We feel victimized, so we try to hold tight to whatever we figure out as a way to survive”. Accepting this is a daunting task for anyone, especially for people who are having to confront their own trauma, and a task which demands a secure base to move from. Rebuilding trust is a complex task. Unfortunately, the process went ahead without first laying that groundwork together, which made for a tense environment and one which often inadvertently disregarded the needs of the individuals present.

From the outset there was a divide within the group between those who took a more process-orientated, ‘move at the pace of trust’-type approach and those who were impatient to get moving and see results. Given that violation of trust is a pivotal issue for victims of sexual violence and abuse, *one would expect this to be the priority. But* the tide of opinion, understandably anxious to feel a continued sense of forward motion, gradually swept aside this concern. This in itself was retraumatising and led to many being unable to participate at all.

This difference in priorities mirrors so-called gendered differences. The masculine principle being one orientated towards action, control, and progress, is the principle upon which global capitalism has been built. The version of femininity with which we’re familiar presents only a warped and stunted view of ‘the feminine’, produced through the imposition of patriarchy on the role and countenance of

women. The feminine principle, on the other hand, encapsulates an understanding of the process as a whole which openly embraces change and the unknown.

The common misconception that these approaches are somehow delineated between genders erases the pervasive influence of imperialist-capitalist-hetero-patriarchy on our psyches and our consequent attempts either to resist it or to succeed within the narrow framework on offer. More than any other comparison these distinctions reflect left and right brain functioning\*, and both are necessary for being able to produce a balanced approach.

### ***Content of Discussions and Trauma***

The group was configured primarily as an intellectual endeavour, not a space for meeting the needs of those involved. At times conversations were so abstract as to be alienating, especially for someone with a history of sexual violence themselves. When we draw attention to the prevalence of sexual violence, we do so to highlight that its causes are systemic. But since our personal experiences are particular, treating these as purely social or political phenomena can become dehumanising. Navigating this space between the lived realities of interpersonal trauma and societal trauma is complex.

When we spoke of structural factors leading to isolation and lack of support, we spoke only of material or resource restrictions such as time, energy, and insufficient mental health services, we didn't give enough consideration to the barriers built up between us causing disconnection and alienation *from each other* which are inherent in this society. Questions of how we relate to one another as persons, as human beings, was side-lined.

We suffered an emotional and spiritual dearth and, with nothing else to hold us up, spending week after week examining in minute detail the structures which oppress us, created a demoralising atmosphere. Unable to support each other effectively through the process of interpreting and internalizing the meaning of these events, like many similar accountability processes, ours produced a gradual drop-off in participation. I found myself unable to express myself emotionally and decided to leave in order to begin my own healing.

Much of the stressful dynamics and rigidity of discussion was due to our varied and idiosyncratic responses to processing these traumatic events, both our own and others. As a group we lacked an understanding of trauma and what its presence in both the subject matter of our discussions, and in our personal experiences of the

same, meant for working together collectively. Our inability to breach this space meant that opinions were informed from a place of fear and lack, rather than one which could rely on those around us for the care and respect warranted by the very real fears which lay beneath them.

In her book *Emergent Strategy* adrienne maree brown perfectly characterises how I felt during our discussions: “we are socialized to see what is wrong, missing, off, to tear down the ideas of others and uplift our own. To a certain degree, our entire future may depend on learning to listen, listen without assumptions or defences”.

The work of creating activist spaces capable of holding space for trauma is in its infancy, but our trauma must be incorporated into our spaces somehow. To do otherwise is to treat trauma as something other than ourselves, something different, unknowable, unrelatable. But trauma is a part of us, and we must learn to move with it, to honour its presence in our lives, and what it has to teach us both about the world we live in and about ourselves.

From *Pleasure Activism*:

*“Shame might be the only thing more prevalent [than trauma], which leads to trauma being hidden, silenced, or relegated to a certain body of people. If we can’t carry our trauma and act normal, if we have a breakdown or lose our jobs/homes/children, there is something wrong with us. What we need is a culture where the common experience of trauma leads to a normalization of healing.”*

The trauma produced by sexual violence isn’t special. We all have trauma of one kind or another. To ignore the very real similarities in the disconnection trauma produces, disconnection from ourselves, our bodies, our surroundings, and from each other, is to treat each other as un-human.

### ***Our Limited Knowledge***

As a group we had little familiarity with responding openly to sexual violence as individuals let alone collectively. Nor did we have much experience of concurrent and unearthed traumas surfacing simultaneously. We were considerably out of our depth. Insecure in ourselves and our knowledge, we attempted to remedy this by creating a reading group.

The material we covered there was restrictive in other ways, mostly white Marxist political theory produced from the Global North (and predominantly the USA) it stuck tightly to the remit of theorising sexual violence. There are rich bodies of

practise and knowledge which theorise from, or work through, the space of trauma. Much of which comes from marginalised knowledges of oppressed groups, notably the Mad, racialized diasporic communities, and Indigenous peoples.

Our trauma goes far deeper than sexual violence. Despite several people's familiarity with the work of Silvia Federici the version of capitalism we critiqued was dislocated from its colonial history, and as such our analytical frame was too narrow to confront the true nature of violence present within the group and society at large. The structure of Whiteness which built capitalism insists that we consider this knowledge beyond our purview, different, separate, unrelated, irrelevant. But the fundamental root of our trauma is the same and so our paths to recovering ourselves must cross. To acknowledge this is not to claim victimhood but to commit to our undoing and relish in it, to understand that on the other side lies wholeness.

Through restricting our knowledge base many norms of society and our group went unchallenged. If we are truly to understand trauma as the by-product of an oppressively organised society, we must reach into our roots for different imaginaries. Discussions of intergenerational or ancestral trauma are often limited to those who've been racially abused or dislocated, such as Jews and the descendants of slavery. The concept is also applicable for white people, through the lens of the development of our imperial and classed society who were violently dispossessed from our land for the founding of capitalism. This history has left us severed from our own holistic traditions of healing, and self-knowledge; folklore and popular stories are another tool to reconnect us with our sense of place.

When we speak of healing we speak of wholeness. And so necessarily the whole interconnected web of human experience is essential material for reconfiguring our place in the world and for reimagining a world worth living in. As a partial attempt to combat this knowledge lack, I've included some additional readings.

### ***My Experiences of Sexual Violence and Healing***

When I began having flashbacks, I finally realised that I was going to have to deal with what had been done to me, whether I wanted to or not. I was raped twice, once at the beginning of my second year of university and once towards the end of my third. My first rape was a one night stand I'd written off as a bad time, being unaware that non-verbal threats could constitute circumstances in which consent is voided, even by the limited definitions of our deficient legal system.

The second was by a boyfriend, together we'd been practising BDSM; because of the increased risk involved in these kinds of activities and dynamics, BDSM practice involves negotiating limits, desires, and consent beforehand. We both knew how this was supposed to work and yet, still, despite this, he went ahead with a sexual act we'd never discussed before without checking in with me and triggered a freeze response induced by my previous trauma. Confronting what had happened either with myself or with my then boyfriend felt unbearable, so I suppressed the experience and continued to live my life as though nothing had happened.

Like others who came forward as the months progressed, I spoke about my first rape within the group eventually but the BDSM component of my second rape prevented me from sharing that experience. I didn't want to abandon the sexual desires that had found me in that situation nor view my boyfriend as a callous rapist, and I received little alternative ways of making sense of my experiences within this process. I didn't feel there was space here for me to open up to the vulnerability of exploring these deeply traumatic wounds that I didn't understand myself.

My sense of these wounds felt fragile and I didn't believe they could be held in the way I needed. I didn't even think any trained professional would be kink-literate – a prerequisite for me to feel safe enough to talk about my experiences – so much that it didn't even occur to me to look. It took me four years after that rape to be able to find a competent therapist who I was comfortable to navigate this with. To date, I've seen no rape or sexual assault support services that mention BDSM at all, not even ones aimed at LGBTQ folks, a large number of whom practise kink in their sexual lives.

During this accountability process I lost my libido, this is a common symptom of sexual trauma. Dwelling incessantly in the miserable depths of structural violence is harrowing work, work which for the preservation of our health, sanity, and sanctity needs balancing with something nourishing, something healing. Collectively we found it difficult to envision what healthy consensual sexuality could look like. In other words, we struggled to maintain hope. It's just as important for us to consider what we want from sex as well as how it's been lacking so far. Let us joyfully imagine how wonderful desire could be.

After leaving the community accountability group I was, eventually, able to redirect my efforts towards my own healing, to understand that justice can mean simply the justice of restoring wholeness to myself, and to be able to enjoy my sexuality once more. During this process I came to understand that what I thought I'd lost through my rapes was illusory. What I was really grieving was a lost future of sexual

emancipation because this wasn't really something I'd had before. A future which I can still achieve even if its shape is markedly different now.

Living in the shadow of a society which demonized sexual pleasure for centuries, it's necessary to consider how our own shame about our consensual sexual preferences might influence the ease with which we can talk about sexual violence. In her Ted Talk, relationship therapist, Esther Perel notes that "most of us get turned on at night by the very things we demonstrate against during the day...the erotic mind is not very politically correct." How can we give ourselves permission to enjoy fulfilling sexual lives when the sex we enjoy feels wrong?

Moving forward from the revelations of Me Too will involve asking difficult, searching questions, requiring us to be brave in opening up about our sexuality. In *The Erotic Mind* Jack Morin claims that "the erotic experience, by its very nature, is shaped by the push-pull of opposing forces and is therefore energetic, interactive, and potentially dangerous". Accepting sex in its full complexity then means finding ways to move through that threat without ruining the fun of transgression (a notion he calls '*the naughtiness factor*'). How can we ensure we can distinguish good sex from sexual assault when we sometimes enjoy that feeling of wrongness?

Whether we've been socialised into occupying the roles of victim and perpetrator or not, there's an inherent risk involved when two wills collide as they do even in consensual sex. Accepting the truth of that and working from there to build ways we can both be aware of and communicate our needs, limits, and desires effectively is an essential step in creating a world where we can enjoy enriching sexual lives. BDSM practise offers some models for how this communication can work.

People often resist taking this approach to communicating consent because they think it 'spoils the surprise' but imagination is a powerful tool and there's no reason why fantasy can't become part of that delicious dance as well. In Perel's words: "we can imagine it, we can hint at it. We don't even have to do it. We can experience that powerful thing called anticipation which is a mortar to desire. The ability to imagine it as if it's happening, to experience it as if it's happening, while nothing is happening and everything is happening at the same time".

## **Conclusions**

I have no idea what my healing process would've looked like otherwise but I am glad that when my trauma came up I was surrounded by people who cared deeply at the injustice of it, even though they remained unaware of what had happened to me. It

meant that even in silence I felt supported, however inadequate that support was in terms of my emotional healing.

It is a sad fact that the bar for supportive environments for victims of sexual assault is so low that this, at times clinically abstract, discussion group was a life raft for many of us with previous experiences of sexual violence. This process gave me a vessel through which to channel my anger, a purpose to aim for, and people to share in it with me. But this ricocheting rage was also damaging and an important part of my healing has been to release myself from some of that anger.

With every acknowledgement, recognition, and response the experiences of us victims are solidified into a form which can begin to be addressed. This accountability process sent the message that we will no longer allow survivors to suffer alone in awareness of this unjust world. Together we are stronger, and we can begin to wonder what work we must do to create a better world, one where justice is possible, whatever that may mean and, hopefully one where less harm happens in the first place.

There's no need to lose heart from the difficulty of every attempt to seek justice for sexual violence. We always learn as much, if not more, from failure as we do from success. But I hope that we can open ourselves up to a broader range of possibilities for accountability efforts, those which are able to take the emotional and spiritual needs of their number more seriously, especially the victims who will inevitably dwell among them.

Our work neither starts nor ends with individual accountability processes, it is so much bigger than any one attempt to seek justice and we must continue to incorporate the lessons we learn about the depths of damage capitalism has seared into our psyches, in both our radical endeavours and our daily lives. Otherwise, what's the point? But we must learn to do this with kindness and compassion for ourselves and our communities not always present in the Leftist groups I've worked with.

The process was an important first step towards self-acceptance of my own rapes. For that, however difficult it was at times, I am immensely grateful to everyone who participated, and most especially to the survivor in this case, whose strength and determination in coming forward shone a light on my own experiences. And I am extremely thankful that we were able to give her what she needed to feel able to return and visit us.

### ***Further Reading***

- ❑ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (See also her blog: <https://feministkilljoys.com/> )
- ❑ adrienne maree brown *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (See also her blog: <http://adriennemareebrown.net/> )
- ❑ adrienne maree brown *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*
- ❑ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*
- ❑ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*
- ❑ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, brain, and body in the transformation of trauma*
- ❑ Peter Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*
- ❑ Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic*
- ❑ Jack Morin, *The Erotic Mind*
- ❑ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*
- ❑ <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/sexual-assault-survivors-talk-about-sex-after-rape>
- ❑ <https://norasamaran.com/2016/02/11/the-opposite-of-rape-culture-is-nurturance-culture-2/>
- ❑ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/06/01/728398532/how-to-talk-about-sex-and-consent-4-lessons-from-the-kink-community>

\*For more on this see Iain McGilchrist's, for a simple introduction start here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFs9WO2B8uI>

## Resources

'We' are no organisation or formal group of people but those who got engaged in the process. Some of us knew the victim and were present at the time the abuse happened, others had no personal connection to either the victim or the perpetrator. What brought us together was the idea of overcoming the silence around this issue and taking it seriously. With the publication of this website we close a chapter in this process and there are no functioning groups that will continue to meet.

A support group of the victim will check the email address provided in the open letter for the next few months: [against\\_rape@riseup.net](mailto:against_rape@riseup.net). The victim is organised in the German radical left Organisation interventionist Left (iL)\*. The group has given itself a guideline of how to deal with cases of sexualised violence and has created permanent structures that victims can turn to to find support.

If you are looking for support in cases of sexualised violence, this is not an extensive list, but these might be useful contacts:

- ❑ Rape Crisis England & Wales
- ❑ Rape Crisis Northern Ireland
- ❑ Rape Crisis Scotland
- ❑ Rape Crisis Network Ireland
- ❑ <https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org>
- ❑ <https://www.hilfetelefon.de/> (Germany)

If you want to read more into community accountability and transformative justice, you might find these websites helpful

- ❑ Transformative Justice Kollektiv Berlin:  
<https://www.transformativejustice.eu/en/>
- ❑ Creative Interventions: Resources for everyday people to end violence:  
<http://www.creative-interventions.org/>
- ❑ The Revolution starts at home:  
<http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Revolution-st-arts-at-home-zine.pdf>

- ❑ Guidelines on dealing with cases of sexualised violence by the interventionist Left:  
<https://interventionistische-linke.org/beitrag/il-leitfaden-veroeffentlicht>

Here is a list of a couple of books that some people who were part of the accountability process found useful to read to get their heads around some basic dynamics with regards to sexualised violence:

- ❑ Judith Hermann: "Trauma and Recovery"
- ❑ Lundy Bancroft: "Why does he do that?"

## WRITE TO US

You can contact us at [against\\_rape@riseup.net](mailto:against_rape@riseup.net)