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VAWA @ 20: THE GENDER JUSTICE MOVEMENT: THE FULLEST EXPRESSION OF THE FORMER BATTERED WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MOVEMENT

Tiloma Jayasinghe, J.D., Executive Director, Sakhi for South Asian Women

How long are we going to push our movement to move, before it actually does? In academia, in activism, in front-line service work, and back-office messaging, the emerging mainstream of America is clamoring for a movement to end gender violence that embraces their identity and their needs. Historically marginalized communities may still be vulnerable because of structural oppressions that pose barriers to the fullest expression of their strength, but we are growing in size. How many times does Beth Richie have to note that feminists “won the mainstream but lost the movement” before we (and by we I mean all those with an anti-oppressive, intersectional lens to ending gender violence) capitalize upon that loss and form a more perfect movement?¹ “Challenges to the traditional feminist framing of intimate partner violence demand a “more nuanced framing that attends to the intersections of race, gender, class, and disability combined with our more robust understanding of abuse.”²

When someone asks what I do for a living, I used to say, “I run a domestic violence agency.” Then, that started to feel problematic, so I started to say, “I run an anti-domestic violence agency.” And that also felt wrong in some way, both because it did not capture the breadth and scope of our work, and because it was framed in the negative. Even if I used a

¹ Beth Richie, Plenary Opening Remarks at the Converge Conference, University of Miami Law School (Feb. 2014).

² Julie Goldscheid, *Gender Neutrality, the “Violence Against Women” Frame, and Transformative Reform*, 82 UMKC L. REV. 623, 640 (2014).

more inclusive frame to hold the scope of violence that we address, and say that Sakhi is an “anti-gender violence organization” that still is described as what we are not, rather than what we are and what we are FOR. When naming the problem, we should certainly inscribe to a more holistic and comprehensive term such as gender violence to account for the diversity of experience and identification of the people who are impacted. But how should we define the movement? To date, we have identified ourselves as the problem we are trying to eliminate. The predominant rhetoric, in fact, names an entire movement by a very limited term – “domestic violence” movement. But even the “movement to end violence” or the “gender violence” movement does not really set forth our goals in a positive, aspirational light. Plus, to many of us working on the so-called margins of the movement, the term “domestic violence movement” has the implications of being mainstream, racist, un-nuanced, and un-responsive to our communities’ needs, and in fact, willing to sacrifice them and their needs, for some larger good. What that good is, I don’t know. Twenty years since the passage of the Violence against Women Act, which resulted after decades of work of the battered women’s movement, it is about time that the movement identifies itself with something we can all rally behind and work to achieve. Accordingly, just as the scope of the problem is broad, so should the umbrella term for all those who seek to end it be – the counterpoint of gender violence is gender justice. We moved away from calling ourselves the battered women’s movement. We can do it again, and this time move away from “domestic violence movement” to the “gender justice movement.”

Gender Justice can be defined as follows:

Gender justice envisions and fights for a world in which people of all gender identities and expressions have the support and resources they need to live safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives. These might include, but are not limited to, safe and loving homes and families, comprehensive and accessible healthcare, material security (i.e. job security and food security), cultural expression, education, and political agency. Gender justice recognizes that realizing this vision cannot be done without considering issues of gender, race, socioeconomic class, sexuality, nationality, ability, age, and other factors that inform identity and power, and thus, consistently works with an intersectional approach to its activism.³

This is just one aspect of its definition, and it is at a stage of malleability, where it can be developed and defined in more clear ways through participation of the movement to end gender violence. But, like

³ I supervised a group of Barnard undergrad students who engaged in research on gender justice issues, and this was the definition that the bright, diverse, committed group of young women developed. I use it here as an example, not as the one, true definition.

Juliet, you may ask, what's in a name?

Names have power. Framing is important, the way we name, identify and advocate around named terms have capacity to move people, money, resources and goals. Framing can be used by social justice movements to send a message and advocate for social change.⁴ Ensuring positive framing of our movement's goals and the work of the people within it validates the tenet of resilience and recovery that are linchpins of our work. Marginalization is not the same as eternal damnation — there is power to transform, there are great skills, knowledge and capabilities that must be respected in even the most marginalized, “vulnerable” class. These communities are resilient, strong, and have integrity. In the US, communities of color, immigrant communities, queer communities, are all often described as vulnerable or marginalized, but we must also be named resilient — of having the capacity and the deep-seated knowledge and ability to be invulnerable and centered if we can address any barriers that hold us back. Survivors of gender violence from these communities are entitled to more than just survival strategies — they should thrive. The concept of thriving is not part of becoming less vulnerable — that's just surviving. Thriving, is a much more lush and luxurious concept — reflecting resilience and strength.

An intentional focus on framing, and naming our work in broader, more nuanced ways enables us to include more allies and participants in working towards shared goals, gives voice to people who experience gender violence from diverse, often ignored social locations and cultural backgrounds and emphasizes a structural approach that recognizes multiple oppressions and interlocking systems of power and dominance.⁵ The experiences of the newly formed New York City Gender Justice Taskforce is a perfect example of what can happen if the gender violence movement embraces gender justice as a rallying call. Although it is still nascent in development, it may be an exciting harbinger of things to come. The coalition was quickly cobbled together in order to ensure that the new mayoral administration in NYC heard the issues and recommendations of those who respond and work to end gender violence. The coalition comprised of sexual assault, domestic violence, and shelter agencies — all mainly service providers, including the agency I lead, Sakhi for South Asian Women. When we were deliberating names that could be inclusive of everyone at the table, the name Gender Justice was identified. It was broad enough to hold all the groups and individuals who were part of the coalition. The term is not used as a proxy

⁴ *Supra* note 2, at 647 (citing Nixon J., Humphreys, C., *Marshaling the Evidence: Using Intersectionality in the Domestic Violence Frame*, 17 SOC. POL.: INT'L STUD. IN GENDER ST. & SOC'Y 137, 141 (2010)).

⁵ *Supra* note 2, at 652-3.

for an amalgam of sexual assault/domestic violence/shelter advocates. Adopting the term gender justice requires an intersectional, inclusive, anti-oppressive lens. To name yourself a gender justice advocate, meant that you worked at the intersection of related movements for social justice, outside of service delivery alone, with an understanding of who was NOT at the table, and understanding that we cannot hope to end violence within the home if we cannot end it in our culture. It is a testament to how innovative and progressive this coalition is that they maintain sight of the advocacy they initiated with administration officials and agencies to promote better services and systems that support survivors of violence, while at the same time adopting an intersectional, inclusive, anti-oppressive lens within the group and committing to do the work that results from adopting such a lens. This means creating spaces to explore the work that is not mainstream, not hinged to criminal legal services, and not typically discussed, and an understanding that context matters, as does language. This means that more groups must be included, and more diversity must be embraced. The experiences of this Taskforce can be viewed as a microcosm for how the movement can develop. As Gender Justice advances the Taskforce's agenda, scope and comprehension, it can advance the domestic violence movement, if it is embraced.

The term gender justice also more fully holds the breadth of work that advocates who works on ending gender violence for their constituencies. Gender violence is more than a single-issue problem. It is more than violence, in fact. Or rather, it is all about violence, but not just domestic, gendered, or intimate-partner related. When a person is experiencing gender violence, there are a whole complexity of other issues that are involved. This is true of any and all communities, but particularly heightened for communities lacking in resilience. The summer of 2014, in which gun-related deaths, murders of black men and youth by law enforcement, dominated our headlines, as well as outright conflict and war abroad, demonstrated issues that the gender justice movement should care about. Women of color are not going to call 911 if they are afraid that the person causing harm may be shot. I can tell you that immigrant, Muslim, women of color often choose to live in violent situations rather than engage in the responses that we currently have at our hands – engagement with the criminal legal system. Take the case of Sakhi. In an average month, the advocate who is working on one woman's case will engage in work alongside immigration reform advocates to address the high rates of deportation and policies like "Secure Communities" that tear families apart. She will engage in civic integration work by providing ESL workshops and training that help survivors navigate the complex city subway system, for example. She will liaise with criminal legal system reform efforts, through

testifying before City Council about instances where law enforcement has failed to provide translation or interpretation services. She will be aware of the huge barrier that the anti-Muslim, anti-South Asian sentiment that arose after 9/11—being perceived as a potential terrorist is a big barrier for a woman to engage in government systems to access services. She assist her client in enrolling in job training courses so that the survivor can bring income into the home. To say that she is only a domestic violence victim advocate would make you think that she is responding to the violence alone. This is the grossest diminution of the scope and breadth of her work. She works at the intersection of numerous social justice issues to promote the resilience, empowerment and transformation of the women she serves. She is a gender justice advocate. She is not unique. Cessation of violence is a critical goal at the heart of our movement, but it is not the end of our work. We all work for more than just the absence of violence; we work towards justice. For the people we serve to enjoy their fullest expression of human dignity. I am a gender justice advocate. My organization works towards gender justice. Join us as we work to end gender violence and promote gender justice.

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