



ABOLITION

TWO ESSAYS ON PRISON ABOLITION:

**A FRESH FRAMEWORK - THE FEMINISM
OF THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT**

**TRADING COPS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS
ISN'T THE SOLUTION TO POLICE**

A RED MACHETE PAMPHLET

A Fresh Framework – The Feminism of the Abolition Movement

By Rayne Fisher Quann

https://transformharm.org/ab_resource/a-fresh-framework-the-feminism-of-the-abolition-movement/

While weeks of protest sparked by racist police killings continue to rock all 50 states, police violence in the United States has come under international criticism. The incessant murder of Black and Indigenous people by so-called “public servants” has forced a conversation about whether the police force is a necessary service at all, and conversations about prison abolition have made their way from viral Twitter threads to the *New York Times*. After decades of work by revolutionary Black women like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba—who recently authored an op-ed in the *NYT* titled, simply, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police”—it seems like the case for an end to the prison-industrial complex has finally made its way into the cultural mainstream.

As may be expected with an issue as controversial as an end to the justice system as we know it, there’s been no shortage of criticism. However, one especially infuriating argument has dominated liberal circles: “What will sexual assault victims do without the police?” The question, posited almost exclusively by white women (or those whose version of progressivism centers them), is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. It’s a microcosm of the white liberal tendency to masquerade anti-Black sentiment behind blandly feminist, purposefully inoffensive whataboutisms that are just progressive enough to shield themselves from criticism. The white liberal mindset has learned that no measure of anti-Blackness is unjustifiable if one can only figure out how to wrap it up in a pink, pro-woman package—but it’s time to pull the wool from over our eyes.

Despite the mountain of evidence pointing toward the fact that the police exacerbate harm to women and femmes, the sexual-assault

argument has a way of persisting. At first glance, it can seem like a valid concern— especially to feminists and progressives who may otherwise support abolition—but upon further investigation, it's part of a much larger (and far more dangerous) trend. For decades, white supremacy has found shelter behind the aesthetics of feminism, and the argument that sexual violence necessitates the existence of the police is just another example of anti-Black ideology commodifying feminist language to Trojan-horse its way into progressive discourse. White feminism has bastardized the women's rights movement to justify racist and oppressive institutions for as long as there's been a women's rights movement, and it's time to call it out for what it is: racism.

The theory behind abolition is clear: Not only are police not necessary for justice or peace, but they actively limit our ability to effectively reach *either* on an individual or structural level. There's no logical reason why this principle should apply to sexual assault cases any differently than it applies to theft or white-collar crime. So why do people insist on arguing as though it does? The answer to that question hinges upon the well-documented historical weaponization of white femininity. White women, while oppressed in some ways, function as oppressors in many others—especially when it comes to the ways they benefit and profit from white supremacy. While the principles of abolition state that the existence of the police harms all of us, many people in positions of racial or socioeconomic privilege never really realize this. They grow up in “nice” communities, with a skin color that doesn't brand them as a threat, therefore the police treat them decently. However, because of the insular nature of both richness and whiteness, that can sometimes lead these people to believe that the police are inherently good.

Even if there was some part of the white elite that recognized how the carceral police state treats people of color, there may be a larger part of them—conscious or unconscious—that's *comfortable* in a system that puts them on top. So they resist the abolition of the police, and they resist the destruction of racism as a whole. Feminism doesn't exempt white women from this mode of thought, and it never has. Throughout history, white women have successfully weaponized their femininity

both to oppress people of color and to defend themselves from the responsibility of doing so. The sexual-violence argument, which seeks to uphold the racist criminal justice machine under the guise of pro-woman progressivism, is no different. But victims of sexual violence have always had a place in the transformative justice movement.

“[Victims] aren’t finding justice through the state, and carcerality hasn’t really provided them with safety or accountability for the people who’ve hurt them. Abolition is a framework by which we can understand a different way to hold people accountable, especially for sexual harm,” journalist and abolitionist organizer Reina Sultan, who has contributed to *Bitch*, says. In fact, many of the leading sexual violence response centers across the country and beyond haven’t relied on the criminal justice system in decades. The Women’s Coalition of St. Croix, a groundbreaking women’s aid center founded in part by Audre Lorde, has relied on transformative justice since 1981. More recent institutions like the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective and INCITE! have trauma-informed, grassroots, and transformative approaches to sexual violence prevention that not only help to heal survivors, but prevent perpetrators from causing more harm. As Sultan told *Bitch*, “With transformative justice, we’re able to use the community to get to the root of the problem. Abolition *is* feminism... You can’t have an abolitionist movement that isn’t feminist.”

No two transformative justice practices are the same, because no two cases of violence are the same, but the processes are often similar. “A common structure for a [transformative justice] process is you have a survivor and three or four people supporting them. Then you have the person who caused harm and three or four people supporting them in their accountability,” prominent abolitionist Mia Mingus told *Colorlines* in 2017. “Then you’ll have the survivor think of what their demands are. What would it look like for a person who caused harm to be accountable to you?...[Transformative justice] processes are not just about the person who caused harm, it’s about things that support the survivor, too.” Supporting and validating survivors of sexual violence is worthy of more thought and energy than a knee-jerk reaction that punishes marginalized people. *The police are not a feminist institution*

—they’re both the footsoldiers and the benefactors of racism, sexism, misogynoir, colonialism, and violence.

Black men, for example, are by far the most incarcerated population in the United States and are the most frequent victims of police violence, so when you use the language of feminism to justify the existence of the police, you’re using it to justify the oppression of Black men. This is nothing new: The practice of using unfounded sexual violence allegations to further oppress Black men is a particularly time-honored white feminist tradition. Take the famous case of Emmett Till, who was murdered by two white men after being falsely accused of harassment by a white woman in 1955. The recently viral case of Amy Cooper, a white woman, is another example: The otherwise liberal Pete Buttigieg supporter claimed she called the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man—a verifiable death sentence in today’s America—because she feared he would assault her.

After Cooper’s video went viral, some rushed to her defense with the same faux-feminist argument: “A number of people have pointed out that a woman alone with a man in an isolated area was likely to perceive the remark as threatening,” read one think piece. While these circumstances are all different, their ethos is the same: They all commodify and whitewash the women’s rights movement to protect an institution that has done nothing but harm to vulnerable women, especially Black women and women of color, since its conception. Feminism has become a weapon by which the privileged can defend themselves from any and all accountability while steadfastly ignoring the very populations that intersectional feminism is meant to serve. It has become a get-out-of-jail-free-card by which white women can shirk all responsibility for upholding white supremacy. The police are not a feminist institution—they’re both the footsoldiers and the benefactors of racism, sexism, misogynoir, colonialism, and violence. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather my feminism stood for something different.

Trading Cops for Social Workers Isn't the Solution to Police Violence

By Cameron Rasmussen, Kirk "Jae" James

https://transformharm.org/ab_resource/trading-cops-for-social-workers-isnt-the-solution-to-police-violence/

The U.S. today appears to be approaching a tipping point in dismantling its historical oppression of Black people — specifically, the overt and racialized state-sanctioned violence perpetuated by carceral systems including the police. Decades of abolitionist and Black liberation movement efforts have brought us to this moment in which defunding police departments is not only happening, but also serving as a call to ask why we have police at all. From Frederick Douglass to Critical Resistance, abolition has always been about more than just ridding our society of slavery and carceral systems. Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Mariame Kaba have taught many of us that prison-industrial complex abolition is not only about eliminating imprisonment, policing and surveillance, but about transforming our society, building different responses to harm, reinvesting and redistributing resources, and prefiguring the world we want to live in. A common question of abolitionist work is: What will be done about “crime” in a world with less or no police (and by extension less or no jails, prisons and surveillance)?

An increasingly popular idea has been to replace police with social workers, or to bring more social workers to work alongside the police. There is support in the social work profession for these ideas, including the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the most prominent national professional organization, whose CEO recently spoke on *MSNBC* about the value of police social workers — of which he said, “They love us.... They have our backs as social workers, and we have their backs, so it’s a very good partnership.” The comments

from NASW's leadership are reflective of a major dissonance within social work.

For clarity, we recognize social work to include all workers who identify with the field — encompassing a wide range of commitments to social justice. From social service workers, to organizers, from clinicians to policy makers, from the noncredentialed to the most credentialed. Yet, the most powerful organizations, inclusive of NASW and the Council on Social Work Education, and individuals leading the profession of social work have often negated its organizing value of social justice in the pursuit of capital, professionalization and “legitimacy.”

This has meant aligning social work with systems and structures of power, conceding much of its capacity to address deeply rooted oppression and racialized injustices. A key neoliberal manifestation of these concessions has been to locate the roots of social problems and “crime” in the individual. This harmful idea — that society is endangered not by systems and institutions of the state but by individual behavior — has been foundational to the prison-industrial complex and much of social work. It is then not surprising that social work is so readily accepted as a palatable alternative to police.

Uprisings and rebellions like the one happening now present us with an opportunity to reflect, and to stretch our imagination and behaviors so that our everyday practices, our relationships and our organizations can actualize the values we profess. This moment is asking all of social work, including our institutions like NASW, to reckon with our own history of being accomplices to state violence and to ask ourselves: What can liberatory abolitionist social work look like? And what kind of efforts in the social work community are already paving the way?

Reckoning With Carceral Social Work

To transform social work, we must first reckon with how it is carried out now, as well as within the past. Social work's reckoning must

include confronting our complicity in colonization, in racial capitalism and the logics of neoliberalism, and in our relationship to the carceral state, all of which have become core to social work practice. Suggesting that the answer to reducing the harm of police is to replace them with social workers misses three interconnected truths surfaced by abolitionist work. Social workers have a long and troubled history as partners to the state, more often serving as carceral enforcers than as collaborators toward liberation.

The first is that ending police violence will require much more than changing the *who* and the *how* of responding to harmful behavior. Police violence is a window into the prison-industrial complex, which has required massive investments in the subjugation, criminalization and incarceration of Black people, Indigenous people and other marginalized communities, all the while divesting from their welfare and well-being. Any serious efforts to end police violence must not only transform our responses to harmful behavior, but must also include a massive redistribution of resources, and a reconfiguration of relationships and responsibilities. PIC abolition requires that we invest in the welfare of all people, starting with those at the margins, and that everyone has access to the essential human needs of our society including health care, housing, education and employment.

The second is that social workers have a long and troubled history as partners to the state, more often serving as carceral enforcers than as collaborators toward liberation. Mimi Kim has documented the history of social work's reliance on law enforcement to address domestic violence and the many resulting harms on people at the margins. Dorothy Roberts, Don Lash and others have demonstrated how the child welfare system has served to criminalize and punish Black families and families of color. Most recently, Beth Richie and Kayla Martensen offered the term *carceral services* to identify social work services "that replicate the control, surveillance and punishment of the prison nation."

The partnership with the state begins early on in social work education, where many students are trained via field education internships inside

jails, prisons, probation and parole. However, as a 2013 study concluded, less than 5 percent of social work education offered courses with content related to the criminal legal system. And while we recognize the value of reducing harm within these institutions, the lack of education provided to social work students (among other social, economic and historical forces) often result in an acquiescence to structures of domination, and punitive and often racist ideologies.

Herein lies the foundation of cultivating an abolitionist social work. We must uproot these ideologies — white supremacy, anti-Black racism, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy — that undergird the foundation of the U.S., guide the practices of carceral systems and permeate the ethos of social work. Like social work, police and prisons are relatively new social phenomena, yet they are all informed by unjust belief systems of human hierarchy, where Black people are perceived as inherently criminal, Indigenous people as disposable and LGBTQ people as a threat to the binaries that cement their relevance. A full examination of social work's complicity in upholding these ideologies and atoning for the harm we have caused is a necessary step towards abolition social work.

Toward Abolition Social Work

Abolition social work is an evolving concept and we ourselves continue to grapple with what it is and isn't, as well as the potential it has for our current moment and for the future we want to build. At its best, social work will be the chorus for abolition — partnering in the work of ending state violence, while supporting life affirming relationships, practices and organizations. While our code of ethics is by no means perfect, it nods in the direction of liberation by requiring social and political engagement to ensure that all people are able to meet their material needs and to achieve self-actualization. Building on our charter, abolition of the prison-industrial complex provides a framework and strategies to recalibrate what social work is and can be. And this will require that social work become unrecognizable from its current form. We can imagine a social work rooted in solidarity over

charity, one that is decolonized, de-professionalized, anti-capitalist, and is committed to repair, accountability and continual transformation. Black feminist thought and organizing has taught us to create with intention, to build and imagine simultaneously, and to root our work in possibility. Social work, police and prisons are relatively new social phenomena, yet they are all informed by unjust belief systems of human hierarchy.

As we grow abolitionist social work, discerning which efforts are more or less liberatory is not always self-evident, but it's of critical importance. In our current moment, in which the defunding of police is already happening, we don't have the luxury to require perfect responses, but we can still move forward toward abolition. Dean Spade has helped many of us identify the difference between reformist reforms and liberatory reforms. We have adapted his questions slightly (with permission) to help us consider and discern liberatory social work efforts.

- Is the work accountable to the people it proposes to be working for and with? (i.e. Does it include their leadership? Is it shifting power? Is it working to reduce and eliminate coercion?)
- Does it provide material relief? If yes, at what cost to one's agency and at what risk?
- Does it perpetuate dichotomies and ideologies of good vs. bad, deserving vs. undeserving, violent vs. nonviolent, criminal vs. innocent?
- Does it legitimate or expand carceral systems? (i.e. Does it use, affirm or expand criminalization, incarceration, surveillance and/or punishment?)
- Does it mobilize those most affected for ongoing struggle? (i.e. Is this building power?)

Many social workers are already engaged in building abolitionist work, giving us tangible examples of what's possible. Formations and organizations like Survived and Punished and Release Aging People in Prison are working to free people from prison while building power with those most affected. S.O.U.L. Sisters Leadership Collective

mobilizes systems-involved girls and femmes of color — Black, Brown and Indigenous — to interrupt cycles of state violence, poverty and oppression. Creative Interventions has worked to stop interpersonal violence through transformative justice, building practices and guidance for responding to harm outside of the state. And even outside of social work, organizations like Movement for Family Power are working to end the foster system's policing and punishment of families and to create a world where the dignity and integrity of all families is valued and supported.



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