

**ENDING
OPPRESSION.
BUILDING
SOLIDARITY.
CREATING
COMMUNITY
SOLUTIONS.**

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MATAHARI: EYE OF THE DAY

VIGNETTE NO. 1

“He’s still a big activist somewhere...”

2004: When I finally found out the real story, I said to him it was sexist what he was doing to us. How could he reconcile these lies, the manipulation, and emotional abuse with his big activist image, the image he had used to rope the two of us into this sick game? She is an activist too. I bet she thought the same thing I did from the start: “In this relationship I won’t be dealing with this type of shit because I am dating a “conscious” man. Things will be clear. No lies, no abuse. This guy won’t break down the door to my house, or turn out to be married—like the other guys.” But it wasn’t that different. He had lied to both of us and to himself with such vehemence that I think he actually

believed some of his own stories. He enjoyed so much having the attention of two smart, young, attractive, activist women that he compromised every political principle to keep us in his game. She and I suffered a lot. I know that. We had the information he gave us; he had full control. This game made him feel like he was not the loser that he actually was. He wouldn't admit it, but he thoroughly enjoyed brewing a sick feeling of competition between us. The sad part is now I think if I met her in a different context, I would have liked to have been her friend. Either way, to challenge him never worked. It only egged him on to say things to put me down. How dare I question his politics! He was more "conscious" and more of an activist than I could ever hope to be. Look at how much people respected him. Everyone asked him for advice. He was much older and wiser than I. But now the three of us know it was sexist and wrong what he was doing to us. And it doesn't really matter. He's still a "big activist" somewhere, I'm sure.

Our activist friends were really mostly his activist friends. The circle was closed off to me in the break up. None of these friends wanted to know he was abusive. Maybe it was too unbelievable, or maybe it would have taken too deep a self-revision and too much personal change for any of them to call him on his shit.

Certain things are unique about interpersonal violence, and in particular sexual and partner violence, in activist circles. Generally the communities we call home are small, and without access to them we have a hard time "being activists." Activism is not an activity we can do in isolation. However, isolation can be a necessary part of the process of breaking up or escaping from an abusive relationship. When we move on from these partners we may also have to give up our home communities, or have to renounce certain spaces to preserve our sanity or our safety. This is not simply "splitting your friends," as with any break up. These are fissures in our movements and in the advancement of social justice. It's time we acknowledge the absence of voices, resulting from abuse, as significant political losses. These absences matter; our movements suffer as we do. Yes, we are expected to suck it up, sacrifice personal comfort and safety for the sake of supporting the work. But sometimes

the wounds are too deep, and we simply can't give up anymore of ourselves. We have to run away.

MataHari: Eye of the Day¹ is a social justice organization that strengthens the leadership capacity of immigrants and communities of color, including those who are survivors² of domestic and sexual violence,³ labor exploitation, trafficking, racism, heterosexism and all other forms of oppression. MataHari provides training and skills-building support to communities and organizations nationally in the form of popular education workshops and individualized short or long term consultations. We recognize that when the issues of domestic violence,⁴ rape, and sexual harassment surface among family members, co-workers, and friendship circles, even the most seasoned activists⁵ among us come up short on how to approach the issue.

tackling the tough questions

In the United States, one in three women in straight and queer relationships reports experiencing domestic abuse in her lifetime.⁶ MataHari believes this rate to be much closer to one in two,⁷ as most abuse situations remain unnamed and go unreported. As activists, we frequently make idealized assumptions that domestic and sexual violence can't possibly exist within our own circles, that we are "above" all that. Sadly, however, this is not (nor has it ever been) our reality: domestic and sexual violence is a prevalent cancer, weakening, limiting, and threatening to destroy our social justice movements. We know anecdotally that when it becomes known that intimate violence has been perpetrated by our activist comrades and committed within our activist communities, silence, denial, and organizational and community self-protection often rise to the forefront. How we as activists deal with our personal and public response when such a crisis occurs is a real test of our mettle. As activists of color, we often feel an additional responsibility to "represent" and "protect" our racial/ethnic communities. We may feel conflicting allegiances and pressure to stand in solidarity with the "cause," rather than take a unified stand against the violence perpetrated by our comrade and recognize its significant impact on our communities.

This is where our movement breaks down and community accountability fails. Our silence and inaction give permission for violence to continue. We must then turn the mirror on ourselves and take a hard look at our own internalized oppressions that act as barriers to responding to domestic and sexual violence, and ask ourselves the tough questions: *What is our collective responsibility to tackle this private and public conundrum? How do we hold ourselves and offenders in our circle accountable for abusive behavior? How do we unravel the emotional entanglements and ties that can either cloud or enhance our judgment? How do we take a stand? How can communities prioritize domestic and sexual violence as an integral part of the social justice struggle? How do we move intimate violence from the private sphere and into the public light without feeling as if we are "betraying the cause" or exposing our communities of color to dangerous public scrutiny and further oppression?*

home and the movement, one and the same

In activism, our homes are extended into our communities; our comrades are part of our family. The trauma we experience in private (whether at home or work) spills over into our community work, and often it either drives us or paralyzes us—in either instance, trauma shapes our activism. The political is personal too. In our experiences working within women of color-led activist groups in the US, we see the astounding extent to which the epidemic of sexual violence has impacted the political lenses of women of color. So much of our activism and other political work has been tainted by, driven by, paralyzed by, and/or involves fighting against sexual and partner violence. In addition, our experience of simultaneous oppressions makes it impossible to separate and respond to sexual violence, domestic violence, sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and classism as isolated entities. At some point it's even difficult to separate the "organizer" from the "survivor." The complexities we must navigate daily to remain committed to movements populated by our abusers, by people we feel have betrayed our trust, by movements that have failed to protect us or centralize our experiences, compounds our

work and fatigues us spiritually and emotionally. Among ourselves, we kid around that our meetings of women of color activist groups are sometimes more group therapy than anything else, but there is really nothing funny about this. Claiming the complex identity "activist of color" while simultaneously identifying as survivors of abuse, racism, and heterosexism, we publicly fight oppression while nursing painful wounds. Yes, we heal as we fight back. However, the necessary process of healing can be thwarted when, in our fighting back, we remain unsafe, alone, and ignored, and those wounds are inflicted again—this time by communities that are indifferent to, or complicit with, abusers whose behavior goes unchecked.

The attitudes and silences that prevail in the experiences of many of the survivors in the vignettes⁸ we share here extend to issues of partner violence, racism, sexism, xenophobia, heterosexism, and other forms of violence and repression. It is at these crucial *intersecting* oppression points that MataHari's work finds its power. Through this essay, we hope to contribute usable suggestions for creating safety and support for and with survivors. We offer suggestions to help survivors come forward with greater support from allies and to allies on how to provide that support.

our stories

The four vignettes shared are situations that MataHari members have been directly involved in. Some are personal reflections of survivors. Others are reflections by organizers. Each sheds light on what was and what could have been, and illuminates angles of intervention (or lack thereof), the impact of trauma, and the community strengths and breakdowns that occur. Although not all of these narratives directly address "domestic violence" (i.e., between two activists in a romantic relationship, marriage, or cohabitation situation), they do highlight a range of intersecting, interpersonal forms of violence between activists, by a public figure against his partner, and/or in responses from allies. The lessons learned and corresponding recommendations may provide useful guidance in developing sensible strategies for survivor safety and support. Bear in mind that there

is no "one-size-fits-all" resolution to every situation. Each situation will require its own customized strategy based on each survivor's safety, socioeconomic, legal, immigration, linguistic, health, emotional, and psychological circumstances, among others. Similarly, each community that any survivor is a part of will have its own culture, its own strength in the ties and composition of members who may hold varying sets of values, experiences, and connections. How you, as survivor or ally in a given situation, receive and make meaning of these narratives and guidelines is your journey, as you envision creating community solutions to address partner and sexual violence. Use your creativity, insight, political consciousness, sensibility, and wisdom to learn, absorb, critique, and be inspired to make the change you see fit to in your life.

VIGNETTE NO. 2

How on earth did this become about something else???

Oklahoma, April 2006: Seven immigrant Spanish-speaking women workers make a distressing disclosure to two worker center interns tabling a booth at a health fair one Sunday. The women reported long-term and ongoing sexual abuse by bosses and co-workers in the factory where they worked. The women divulged that they had been raped, and some even impregnated. One of the women, a lesbian, said she was sexually violated, and her partner made to watch the assault in order to "straighten them out." Another woman said that her husband blamed her for the rapes and that things at home were tumultuous.

The factory is located in a predominantly white, rural community in Oklahoma. The 250 or so workers formed an isolated community of immigrants in that region. They were non-English speakers and were undocumented. They were terrified to report the abuse to anyone for fear of being arrested or deported. Initially there were no bilingual services or safe places to turn to closer than at least ten hours from where the women lived and worked. Now this small worker center, located an hour away from the factory, where the two bilingual/bicultural students interned, served as a safe haven. Lisa

(who spoke only English) was the worker center director and only paid staff. The two young Mexican American college student interns, Melina and Jose, to whom the women disclosed the violence, were now the primary contacts for the survivors. And just as the workers felt isolated in the community, with this critical revelation, the worker center staff felt overwhelmed, unprepared, and helpless to handle a catastrophe of such magnitude without support.

MataHari was brought in by Lisa to offer brief consultation and training to the worker center staff. We provided the worker center team with basic information on understanding the traumatic impact of sexual assault and domestic violence, brainstormed strategies for survivor safety within the context of their particular region, and discussed potential immigration remedies for undocumented victims of violent crime.

May 2009: The worker center organized an emergency consultation meeting among several well-respected national social justice advocacy groups whom they believed could help offer strategy and intervention support for the workers in crisis. The invitees included a leading national legal services organization, two renowned civil rights organizations, a national workers' rights advocacy group, and a national interfaith labor advocacy group. Lisa sought MataHari's partnership in co-facilitating the meeting. We led by framing the discussion to describe the sexual violence affecting the workers daily, the critical situation that the immigrants working in this factory were facing, and the need to support the women with a safety plan that would help stop the violence while keeping them and their families safe from deportation and/or homelessness. We were eager to get the expertise and input from these national advocacy giants on how to proceed, and felt like we were going to be supported by the most seasoned organizers from larger, more-resourced organizations. We expected this discussion to offer useful insight for building a comprehensive strategy and safety plan that we hoped could be implemented collaboratively.

However, Lisa and I were taken aback when, within five minutes of presenting the critical issue of sexual violence, the group discussion took (for us)

an unexpected turn. As a solution, the national advocates spoke energetically about building a “wage-an-hour” campaign for the workers. How on earth did this become about something else entirely?? An awkward silence fell when we pressed the group to discuss how we were going to address the issue of sexual assault and, critically, the safety needs of the women. There was no safety plan discussed, no community organizing strategy to deal with the violence. In our minds, Lisa and I knew that organizing a wage-an-hour campaign would take months, maybe even years to take off, if it were even possible. In this room the rape of undocumented women seemed to be accepted as routine, normal, collateral damage, to be dealt with only if the opportunity arose during the wage campaign. There were no ideas coming forth for an organizing or outreach strategy for women’s safety.

I guess we were a bit naïve. We realized, there and then, that even among the great “giants” in progressive organizing, so, so much was missing from the skills and analyses needed to address sexual and domestic violence. We realized we were alone in this. The women workers, too. People just don’t know how. Or maybe it’s just easier not to know....

In this situation, a small, under-staffed, under-resourced worker center was unable to take on the task of organizing any kind of large-scale intervention on its own, and required a much bigger support infrastructure. In addition, the center was smack in the middle of a particularly conservative, racist part of the state with no allies within hours. What the worker center was able to do was provide a space at their office to hold a weekly “Latina Workers’ Potluck.” A few women came to these groups. The numbers fluctuated. The group was facilitated with the support of the young Mexican American intern, who heard week after week about the domestic and sexual violence the women faced and fast became their de facto advocate and comrade. It was an overwhelming responsibility for a first-year college student who did not have any experience or training as a counselor, a trial by fire. MataHari was able to offer periodic consultation, from afar, to the worker center staff around safety and support as issues arose for them. This long-distance support was

certainly less than ideal, but we were the only option available to this group in Oklahoma. We worked with them to identify sexual assault and domestic violence resources in closer proximity, but there were none within driving distance, and the relatively closer ones in the area were not familiar with working with immigrant and non-English speaking populations, or with workers. Together with the center team, we constantly brainstormed lists of other social justice allies who might assist them, such as the nearby faith community doing environmental justice work and the women’s shelter staff at a homeless residential program in a neighboring town. Additionally, MataHari helped raise emergency funds to purchase plane tickets for the lesbian couple to escape the factory and town and return to their home country. The other women chose to remain at the factory, not wanting to either lose their livelihood or face deportation.

For MataHari, this was a powerful reminder that the need for anti-domestic and sexual violence organizing is huge beyond imagination, especially among unions and labor organizers in the US. The vocabulary and skills needed to deal with violence in the movement are sorely lacking. This kind of dispersed, “non-specific” response to workplace sexual violence is a “way out” from taking responsibility for and establishing coordinated legal and organizing protocols and strategies to assist survivors as a critical part of labor and immigrant organizing work. This raises a hard but important question: Are we collectively failing to be outraged enough to create systems that can respond to this type of epidemic faced by immigrants of color because undocumented brown people are seen as disposable? One thing is clear: We have a long way to go, and a lot of work to do, both inside and outside our social justice movements, within our communities, and within ourselves.

VIGNETTE NO. 3

My welcome into US activist circles...

1996: I was 17, a recent immigrant from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. My mom, my younger brother, and I lived in the projects in an urban neighborhood

of Boston which, prior to gentrification by white activists, was a low-income community of color. I was starting school and got my first work-study job at a nonprofit community organization in my neighborhood that did tenants' rights work, particularly working with the Latino community. I chose to apply there because the politics stated in their job description made me feel like I would be working with people whose politics I respected. I would be helping my neighbors, and making money for school. At the same time, I would be cheap labor to them. It was a sweet deal all around. I did not know it at the time, but that organization was (and still is) well known as part of Boston's radical leftist organizing community. I worked from the office as well as from three local community clinics. My job tasks varied, but in addition to data entry and providing direct service to mostly Spanish-speaking single mothers at the clinics, I was often assigned to do written translations for the Latino committee within this organization, and to do oral translations during board meetings and community forums.

The head of the Latino committee, "R," a permanent staff person, was an adult Puerto Rican married man. Although not officially my boss, he was often in the position of assigning me tasks and supervising my work. Soon after I started to work there, I noticed he would sneak in compliments to me in Spanish, speaking quickly, in the middle of talking about work, so that the other Spanish-speaking people in the office would not catch him. As a work-study part-time intern, I did not have a permanent desk, and this man would often direct me to sit down to work within his range of view. I noticed that even when I was working in a different room, he'd angle his chair to see me. Not too much time passed before he grew bolder, making comments about how I looked, telling me I was beautiful, and soon I realized there would not be a work day that he did not make a comment about my appearance. His delivery started to bother me. It became suggestive, his comments more aggressive, specifically talking about how that skirt made evident the curves of my body, something or other about my eyes, my lips. I would dread having to stay working in the office alone with him. He'd tell me he'd been a high school teacher in Puerto Rico, that I could trust him. Thinking back now to the im-

plications of "R" having access to a lot of young people makes me ill. I noticed that over the months I had started to change the way I dressed so as not to entice his attention. I had nightmares about him. At first, I was just not ready to make this into an issue. He was so much older than me, and the setting, the politics of the people we worked with, all of it made it so that I had a hard time realizing this man was sexually harassing me. Also, the relationship was sometimes that of a boss and employee, sometimes friendly, and sometimes weirdly inappropriate, with blurry and complicated lines, as often these situations are. But after a particular instance where he touched my knee, the fact that he was getting off on telling me these things became very clear to me, and I felt scared and repulsed. I finally reacted, told him off, and left the office.

I complained to two staff people, a woman and a man, also Latinos, who were also my superiors, and from them I received a mixture of excuses and ambivalence. "Tu sabes como es, somos Latinos." Our Latin culture's acceptance of compliments, our "warm blood" was supposed to serve as an excuse; he didn't mean anything bad, really. I was supposed to be understanding. Without explicitly stating so, they made me feel I should not be making a big deal out of it. On our second talk about the issue, the female staff person I spoke with (also mother to a teenager daughter close to my age) conceded that she had noticed his treatment of me was "a little" inappropriate. This same staff person also shared that another woman on staff had complained about him in the past, but he had not been fired. From her perspective, this is who he is, and we deal with him. End of story. (The person whose complaints were not heard quit the organization shortly after).

* Paying attention to office politics more carefully, I realized that this man was the poster leftist Latin American/Caribbean person that the nonprofit's director wanted to use as a representative. He was quite talented at spewing off radical rhetoric in Spanish, à la Che, and getting the Latino constituents of the organization to show up to meetings and demonstrations. Having him on staff was a statement as to how radical a nonprofit they were. The director liked him because he made her look good. Also, the director, a white woman whose activism was connected to the largely white American left-focus during the 1980s

on Central American political issues, appreciated his effective, friendly rapport with the large membership of the all-volunteer Latino committee—a central unit within this organization—a role that I suspect she felt she could not play.

But enough was enough. Our situation had developed over the better part of a whole year. I still felt that my complaints were ignored, so I talked to my mother, who had also become an active member of the Latino committee of this organization. In addition to my work, we both had become regular volunteer organizers and were present at many events organized by this nonprofit. It is strange now to recall how involved we had become, and what a big part of our lives this nonprofit had become, but it reflects how isolated and betrayed we felt as this all unfolded. Together, we decided we needed to bring this issue up at a board meeting. If the staff was unresponsive, at least the board needed to know what was happening. I want to stress that it was not a staff-led initiative that my mother and I go to that meeting. They did not show any desire to be involved. In fact, I felt after I had complained, I had created a division between staff who silently sided with me, and people who still wanted to be friendly with him at work and conduct business as usual (like some sick game of allegiances we might expect more in a corporate board room). The issue made everyone uncomfortable, but it was easier for people to ignore it.

My mother and I knew when the meeting would be because I was scheduled to translate at it, and we literally hijacked it. I spoke, and my mother was there to support me. I remember seeing fear in their faces. Quickly they brought up concerns about the legal issues, and the fact that I was a minor. Although they were apologetic and made efforts to show sympathy, I don't remember board members expressing concerns about my mental health or emotional well-being. After we spoke, the board members said they would deliberate, talk to him, and get back to us. A few days later, the director informed me that "R" had been asked to take time off work and attend therapy sessions for two months, which he refused to do because he did not want his wife to find out about this situation. Instead of accepting their conditions, he would rather quit. During the conversation where the director was telling me this, I informed her that I had decided to leave the organization. She responded, "After we do all this for

you, you still are going to leave us?"—laying guilt on me for causing the loss of this staff person. Although this organization had not known how to protect or support me, and I left feeling that my safety and well-being had been ignored, I still was supposed to feel that I owed her something.

The organization's part-time accountant—whom I'd rarely ever seen, because usually he came after hours—was the only person who, in my last week of work, came up to me and said, "I heard you're leaving, and I want you to know that I know why you are leaving, and I'm angry about it. I'm sorry." I said thanks, but I don't think he knows how much that meant to me, and how grateful I was. Because he usually worked alone and after hours, he was not invested in the office politics and culture of silence that kept other staff members complicit. He was the only one to speak about this at work without whispering, and show me support.

For years, I stopped going to community events, rallies, and marches because "R" would always be at every event. There has never been an acknowledgment, an admittance, or an apology. I still avoid him.

2006: Moving forward ten years, at a May Day rally, as I march with a group of INCITE! Boston sisters in the Boston Common, "R" walks beside us and leans forward looking at me, smiles, and waves. Like old friends. I pretend not to see him.

On the same day, a comrade tells me there is going to be a forum where community leaders will be educating folks about ongoing legislative immigration debates, and asks me to translate. I know this comrade from that same community organization where the issues with "R" happened. She knows about my experience with "R." At the time, she had been a member of the board, and has always been someone I respected because she's a prominent organizer within my own ethnic community. I agree to translate. When I get to the venue, I realize to my horror that she has asked me to translate for "R." When I see him on the panel, I tell her I'll translate for her and a third speaker, but that I don't want to talk to him, and then she says, "Oh my God, I'm sorry—that's right. I forgot." This woman is known for being a soldier in our movement. I respect her work tremendously, but at this moment, I can't help but feel disappointed

on so many levels. As I stand there making an effort to translate for her and concentrate on the work, I wonder how long will his presence and the ghost of this experience continue to compromise every public space of activism that I have access to, and whether it will take every single one of us experiencing harassment before we take this issue seriously.

Perhaps we would not be reading this story if the first complaint against “R” had been taken seriously. We can also imagine this situation being quite different if the staff had confronted the aggressor and intervened in visible ways. Instead, we read a story of avoidance where silence becomes complicity. Despite having a “policy” on the books, the staff of the organization did not know how to respond, and even when forced to respond, comes up short of addressing the safety and emotional needs of the survivor. This failure to respond by the involved community makes activist spaces unsafe for the survivor and makes her feel disconnected from her community. The neglect of the survivor’s feelings that started at the office has extended to other community members over time, making her feel punished for raising the issue, isolated, or like it’s not really a big deal and she should be silent.

VIGNETTE NO. 4

An extraordinary ordinary group of people...

Sun-hi is a Korean immigrant, a nurse in her home country, now working as home-maker and mother of two robust boys, living in relative isolation from dominant US culture in a suburb of New Jersey. She is married to Cho, a prominent, well-respected Korean man, an immigration attorney, community organizer, and mentor to many newcomer Koreans to the US. Sun-hi did not identify as a community activist, although she was relatively involved as a parent in her children’s school.

April 4, 2007: Sun-hi was arrested on an assault and battery charge. After a loud dispute took place in the home in which the children called 911, her hus-

band’s savvy and eloquent communication with the police allowed him the upper hand with the cops. He framed and flipped the story to implicate Sun-hi as the aggressor. Sun-hi’s poor English language skills and misunderstanding of what the police were asking of her at the scene resulted in her making statements in broken English that were misunderstood as an admission to assaulting her husband. She was handcuffed, taken away, and held overnight in a jail cell. Her arrest was reported in the community newspaper. The next day, Cho hired an aggressive family law attorney to begin divorce proceedings, obtained a restraining order barring Sun-hi from him and the kids, and filed for sole legal custody of the children.

Sun-hi was at risk for being convicted of a criminal offense, which could trigger grave immigration consequences, specifically deportation. She was also faced with the shocking loss of custody of her children and homelessness from having a restraining order placed against her and no independent income with which to rent alternative housing, except from court-ordered temporary alimony that her husband was made to pay.

April 5, 2007: As soon as Sun-hi was released from court on bail after her arraignment, she contacted Hyun, her friend and a fellow parent at her children’s school. Hyun happened to also be a MataHari volunteer advocate/organizer. In hearing what happened to Sun-hi, Hyun immediately reached out to her MataHari colleagues for solidarity advocacy and community organizing support for her sister in the community.

April 2007–June 2009: MataHari coordinated grassroots organizing and provided Sun-hi and the Solidarity Team with strategic guidance, education, and contextualized legal information grounded in the reality of institutional and interpersonal racism, and other forms of oppression. We prepared the group as best we could for the grueling, traumatic roller-coaster ride that was Sun-hi’s now forever-changed life. (We discuss the mission, strategy, and work of the Solidarity Team below.) Over the next two years, there were small victories interspersed among many, many disappointments. The solidarity demonstrated

by Sun-hi's support team helped soften the continual "blows" from her husband and the legal system. It helped keep Sun-hi's spirit alive, mitigate her sense of isolation, and give her strength to overcome tremendous losses and her feelings of overwhelming sadness and shame.

From the day that she was arraigned in court until the conclusion of the criminal case and divorce hearings (about 15-20 court dates later and spanning about two years), Sun-hi consistently experienced inept (and worse still) service from the criminal justice system. On the first day in court, fresh from the trauma of abuse and arrest, she was assigned a sexist, unprofessional Korean male court interpreter who chided and humiliated her throughout the hearing for being a "bad wife" instead of doing his job of interpreting the court proceedings. Over the next few months, she was assigned several other court-certified interpreters, many of whom were unable to fully understand or translate the legal language accurately. The ever-changing judges and court personnel were as oblivious to the interpreters' inadequacies as they were inattentive to Sun-hi's needs as a non-English-speaker. Court personnel often "forgot" and would communicate outside the line of interpretation, leaving Sun-hi lost in the process.

December 2007: Frustrated with the language barrier she faced, Sun-hi ended up terminating her (legally competent) English-speaking criminal defense attorney after a month and, against MataHari's and some members of the Solidarity Team's advice, ended up hiring a bilingual criminal defense attorney who marketed himself to the Korean community. This man turned out to be a complete charlatan, jeopardizing many elements of Sun-hi's case by coming to court unprepared, sending his interns to court instead of being present himself, and not following up on ensuring interpreter availability in court. Despite eventually realizing his limitations after several court dates, Sun-hi clung to him because of his ability to fully communicate with her in her language.

At the conclusion of her many legal battles (criminal, family court, and immigration), the only victory had by Sun-hi was the eventual dismissal of her criminal case, after four unsuccessful attempts at a trial (i.e., two situa-

tions where the court interpreters were not summoned; one incident where the prosecutor's office was unprepared to proceed with trial; and a fourth incident, where the police officer who was summoned as a witness for the prosecution was scheduled for vacation on the date of trial). A dismissal safeguarded her from being deported by immigration authorities.

The greatest devastation for Sun-hi was the Family Court outcome. The divorce was finalized and Sun-hi lost custody of her children and was only awarded visitation rights. Her children, now adolescent boys, had bonded with their father over the two years, and were themselves displaying aggressive and condescending behavior toward their mother even at therapist-supervised visitation sessions. The boys over time refused visits with their mother. Sun-hi's heart was broken.

building solidarity, creating community solutions

As an integral part of our anti-violence action and organizing work, and whenever possible, MataHari helps organize with and train a Solidarity Team, a group of trusted allies identified and vetted by the survivor and her trusted helpers to advocate on behalf of, support, and bear witness for the survivor. In areas where MataHari has networks, we are also able to help recruit and recommend trusted allies. So we did for Sun-hi's case, described as follows.

SOLIDARITY TEAM COMPOSITION

Besides Sun-hi herself as the integral member, Sun-hi's Solidarity Team from day one included Hyun (Korean, bilingual mom/MataHari volunteer, who acted as translator for the group and team co-coordinator), another Korean mother from the neighborhood (mostly Korean speaking), and three white Anglo-American moms (all stay-at-home moms from the school who stepped up and reached out to Sun-hi themselves after they read about the arrest in the newspapers), one MataHari staff (Malaysian, team co-coordinator), and several MataHari volunteers (new immigrant Korean, South Asian, Ukrainian, Chinese American, Filipino American, and Mexican American interns who intermittently came to various court dates). All in all, when the Solidarity Team first started out, there

were seven core Solidarity Team members (who remained until the end) and about six intermittent members.

Most of the intermittent MataHari volunteers were undergraduate college-student activists, with the exception of two board members: a homemaker and a college social work professor. With the exception of the students and college professor (whose academic schedules were always in flux), this substantial group of seven remained steady and consistent in supporting Sun-hi throughout the two years. The flexible schedules of the moms and seniors, and the consistency of Hyun and the MataHari staff member, maintained the stability of the group.

SOLIDARITY TEAM MISSION

1. To ensure Sun-hi's personal safety was secured against her abusive husband.
2. To ensure Sun-hi's legal and civil rights were met within the various institutions she was now subjected to.

OBJECTIVES/STRATEGY

To provide the survivor with emotional support and minimize isolation. Both co-coordinators acted as joint counselors for Sun-hi, with Hyun taking on the majority of the counseling role since she spoke Korean. The four mothers volunteered to help Sun-hi maintain some level of normalcy on a consistent basis and over the long term. They organized a routine of meeting Sun-hi for coffee or lunch, inviting her to social gatherings, and keeping her abreast of her children's progress in school and at play dates. They raised emergency funds for Sun-hi to help defray the costs of some of her basic needs. These important gestures helped maintain Sun-hi's sanity, her feeling connected to her children, and her having a sense of not being ostracized or judged.

To offer allies a separate space in which to discuss the emotional, psychological, and traumatic impact of abuse. We also aimed to provide some basic information on the cyclical nature of domestic violence and the conflicting emotions of love, fear, and anger that the survivor might feel toward the

abuser. We mostly had these discussions separate from the survivor (with her knowledge and permission). Given her own emotional, legal, and financial crises at the time, she was not in a position to be the "educator" for the group. MataHari's co-coordinator and Hyun facilitated this discussion and offered information based on our many years of experience supporting survivors.

To provide systematic and clear information about the criminal justice, probate, family and immigration legal systems. We provided the group with legal information about how the system works.⁹ We also prepared Sun-hi and the team for the worst-case scenarios for each court proceeding. It takes a great deal of re-education and actual in-court witnessing to experience how flawed and broken the legal system really is. We engaged in discussion about institutional racism and xenophobia, detailing the barriers and limitations within each system. We debriefed with the group after each court session, and helped "translate" legal language into layperson's terms. This was an ongoing and experiential education process, as most people are socially conditioned to believe in the justice system as a place where justice and due process are actually served.

To watchdog the court system. With the myth of the effectiveness of the legal system continually debunked, the team learned self-reliance. We prepped Sun-hi to advocate for her rights in court. We prepped her to be unafraid to stop the proceedings if interpretation was inadequate, to question her defense counsel if she didn't fully understand his strategy. The allies monitored the legal proceedings and every attorney meeting. At least one person, in addition to Hyun, accompanied Sun-hi to those meetings, so that Hyun could play the role of interpreter and the ally could second-seat Sun-hi by listening to the information presented and by helping to ask clarifying questions of the attorneys. The allies could then debrief and strategize with Sun-hi if she had to make decisions on her case. Hyun monitored the hearings for accurate translation by the court interpreters. If there were inaccuracies, the Solidarity Team took collective action to inform Sun-hi, the counsel, and/or the judge. The team's monitoring enabled us to have the sexist interpreter permanently removed from the case and officially

put the court on notice about the language access gaps. The team also played the role of security, while in court, to minimize interaction or visibility of Sun-hi by Cho, ensuring that we physically blocked Sun-hi from Cho's sight in the waiting areas and otherwise maintaining physical distance between them in public spaces. Watch-dogging the system was important in order to peacefully and respectfully bear witness for Sun-hi, provide emotional support, and monitor a flawed court system to ensure that Sun-hi's rights were not violated. Over the next 20 or so court dates spanning more than two years, groups of about 8-15 people showed up in court with Sun-hi, drawing public, positive acknowledgment from judges about the unusual and extraordinary community presence. More than anything else, this community support loudly signaled to Cho that his behavior was not condoned by the community and that all the years he isolated Sun-hi from the world had begun to be undone.

BUILDING SOLIDARITY

Shortly after Sun-hi's arrest, Hyun and MataHari connected her with two other Korean women who had survived domestic violence. These women were further along in their healing journey, and offered Sun-hi peer-to-peer support when able. As the case progressed, we also folded in Sun-hi's family law attorney, who was amenable to being part of the team when able. He allowed the core team to accompany and ask questions of him at strategy meetings with Sun-hi (at no extra financial cost to her).¹⁰ He expressed personal benefit and appreciation for the community support.

By the final year of the case, through Sun-hi's own organizing efforts, the Solidarity Team had expanded exponentially. The numbers of supporters increased from seven to about 27! These supporters were friends Sun-hi developed after she joined a Korean Presbyterian church not long after she was banished from her home. These church members became an active and daily source of support for her in a time of need. Most of the 15 people were elderly women (probably retirees) and a few men. They were Korean-only speakers.

CENTRALIZED COORDINATION

A MataHari staff member and Hyun played the role of team co-coordinators. This role can be fulfilled by one person or two. In this case, having worked together before and having a bilingual partnership was particularly beneficial for the composition of the team. Due to the fact that both people in question had the most experience in managing domestic violence situations, the group naturally looked to them for initial leadership. The co-coordinator's role was to ensure that the entire team remained on the same page with the same information at all times. They helped Sun-hi ensure that timelines, court dates, and other necessary deadlines were not overlooked. The coordinators did not run the agenda or make any decisions for the team, but merely set a gentle structure and offered guidance about next steps to the team. Over time, different members of the core team informally rotated coordination and provided coverage when one of the official co-coordinators was out of town or couldn't make it to certain court dates. Stepping back and allowing for community members to take on leadership roles was an intentional goal for MataHari.

COMMUNICATION

Streamlining communication is a crucial aspect of community organizing. In this case, the entire group was comfortable with the use of email as a key mode of communication in addition to scheduled face-to-face preparation, debriefing meetings, and court date/lawyer's office accompaniment. The Coordinator acted as the communications hub, setting up a secure email listserv through which the group could communicate logistics, and making sure to create and distribute a list of team members' names and cell phone numbers. Timely and consistent communication (whether by email or phone) is a strong asset that keeps everyone well connected and minimizes miscommunication.

Given our teams' multilingual needs, bidirectional interpreting support was made available at all times.¹¹ Hyun was able to fulfill this role. When Hyun knew she would be unavailable, we scheduled one of the Korean domestic violence survivors who had been providing peer-support to Sun-hi; she would adjust her work schedule to join us in court.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Very early on, the team discussed confidentiality practices. We agreed not to discuss our interactions or work with anyone outside the team. We took several precautions to ensure that our written communications did not become "evidence" that could be subpoenaed in court and potentially used against her: We agreed not to put anything pertaining to the details of Sun-hi's case in writing, including anything that she shared or disclosed to us. When using the listserv, we agreed that only logistical information would be shared by email. No information about Sun-hi's emotional or psychological state, nor anything pertaining to the incident leading to her arrest were to be documented.

DECISION-MAKING

The survivor is central in all decisions as she knows her safety, emotional, and practical needs the best. The survivor drives the process and sets the pace for the Solidarity Team's work (although when involved in the legal system, the "wheels of justice" often drive the pace and timing of crucial matters). The Team supports the survivor and provides critical feedback, acts as a sounding board, is attentive to concrete datelines, and contributes critical thinking, ideas, and strategy for support and action as needed.

As an example, over the two years, Sun-hi sometimes expressed a desire to reconcile with her husband, despite clear rejection from Cho and, eventually, from the boys. This was difficult for the ally team to witness, although we did understand her deep desire to maintain her role as mother to her boys and preserve the family unit. The Team did its best to support her and not judge her for her intentions. It was also difficult for the team to tolerate Sun-hi's defense attorney (the charlatan). We could all clearly see his incompetence and were forthcoming in sharing our concerns about him with Sun-hi. Despite that, Sun-hi felt reluctant to let him go. The Solidarity Team members each struggled with being diplomatic toward him, some better than others. Once it was clear that Sun-hi was going to stick with this lawyer, we had to resign ourselves to accepting her decision. We discussed among ourselves that, for Sun-hi's sake, we had to help her make the best

of the situation. We made sure to watch-dog him and call him out on his games. There were times when meetings were tense. There were even times that Sun-hi preferred for us not to be in the room with her and him, since he had expressed his discomfort with us. Ultimately, we had to let go of our own feelings, for Sun-hi's sake. We sucked it up and monitored each court date with dread and trepidation.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

Managing Conflicts of Interest. The moms on our team were also acquainted with Cho through the school. One Korean mother and her husband were more closely acquainted with Sun-hi's family. To manage her participation in the Solidarity Team, she had an agreement with her own husband about how to manage communication with the Cho family. Her husband was a casual friend of Cho's. This couple agreed between themselves to offer casual support to both parties separately, maintaining some distance in their relationship with Cho and the boys. They did not actively terminate connection with Cho, but rather kept a healthy distance. The other mothers maintained and drew clear boundaries in their ongoing interactions with Cho (at playgroups and school). They did not engage with Cho on a personal level, but maintained consistent, neutral behavior toward Sun-hi's two boys.

Community gossip. Sun-hi faced some amount of backlash from within her ethnic community. She tried to distance herself from those who were unsupportive, to minimize her stress. She connected over time with a new Korean community through a church she joined that increased her support and helped mitigate isolation.

Communicating with children. In our Solidarity Team ally-only meetings, the mothers discussed and shared how to communicate with their kids about what had happened to the Cho family. Because of the public nature of the incident and media coverage, rumors abounded in the school yard. The moms took various approaches. Some did their best to quash rumors that the children were hearing at school about their peers' parents. Others

gave minimal information about the family separating, without going into details.

Language limitations. The majority of the team members' own language limitations limited our ability to communicate with Sun-hi on a deeper and more complex emotional level. We were tremendously fortunate to have Hyun, the counselor and de facto interpreter for us all there from the beginning, but this meant that the weight of the day-to-day communication and emotional support landed substantially on one person. Informally, among ourselves, we processed our own feelings of sadness and anger.

Solidarity Teams are a powerful way to mobilize and build the capacity of a community of people. Organizing ourselves and our friends around providing a safety net for the survivor proved to be an effective way to engage a group of individuals with activism and social justice work. The partnership between community members working alongside the survivor offers an opportunity to provide much needed support while creating space for deep political consciousness-raising work. Allies may gain greater empathy for the complexity of domestic and sexual violence situations. The benefits and life lessons learned can continue to bear fruit beyond the life of this one action. And, hopefully, community members may become better equipped to act on or find support with (universe-forbid) a future crisis that may emerge in their own life, and take strong(er) leadership in organizing a response.

afterword and tools for action

Many variables shape our potential responses to domestic and sexual violence. But much of our ability to respond must come from our hearts, our political conscience, and from being in an emotional, spiritual, and psychological place that is grounded and in full "conscientization."¹² What is it that we can live with at the end of the day? What can help us sleep at night, knowing that we did our best as an ally, a friend, a loving, compassionate person,

to account for the violence that is taking place in our circles? Be solution-focused: We must remember that our goal as an "ally" is not to get sucked into or become a voyeur of someone's pain, but instead to be very conscious and intentional about helping and journeying with the survivor to reach a place of safety, wellness, and stability, as soon as possible. It is crucial to be intentional about not demonizing people in the process, but to be genuinely instrumental in recreating safe conditions, mending broken spirits, providing compassionate support, and finding the best available path toward social justice for all.

notes

Pronouns used in this essay are interchangeable and not intended to create or reinforce binary distinctions along the gender identity spectrum.

- 1 The word "matahari" is of Malay/Bahasa Indonesian origin, meaning "the sun," or, translated literally into English, "the eye of the day." (Mata—"eye"; Hari—"day"). In Sanskrit and Hindi the word "mata" means "mother" and "hari" denotes "god/son of god," thus loosely translated the word means "mother goddess."
- 2 In this article, we use the term "survivor" to refer to survivors of domestic and sexual assault.
- 3 In this article, the term "sexual violence" includes sexual harassment, rape, molestation, and incest.
- 4 In this article, we use the term "domestic violence" interchangeably with partner violence, intimate partner violence, and domestic abuse.
- 5 In this article, we use the terms "activist" and "organizer" interchangeably.
- 6 Lawrence A. Greenfeld, et al. *Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends* (1998). The one in three rate accounts for survivors who report abuse in medical settings and to law enforcement.
- 7 We "guesstimated" this figure from MataHari survivor data, gathered over the last seven years. This is also an estimate based on MataHari staff's prior professional experiences of working as counselors/advocates in traditional domestic and sexual violence programs over the last 15 years. This data is also reflected in *Violence by Intimates*.

- 8 Identifying information, including details about location, in all vignettes has been modified to protect the confidentiality of community members involved.
- 9 This MataHari staff member has had three years of working as a domestic violence and crime victim advocate within the criminal justice system and close to 15 years of advocacy experience with survivors in criminal, probate, and immigration courts. Hyun had about ten years of experience advocating for survivors in probate court.
- 10 Always ensure that the survivor has an upfront conversation with any of their attorneys about how and what the attorneys charge their clients for. Typically the cost of a family law attorney ranges from about \$150–\$300/hour (in most urban settings on the East and West Coasts). Most attorneys charge by the quarter-hour (15 minutes) and a brief five-minute phone call to your attorney could cost you 25 percent of their hourly fee. So, too, with community meetings or calls that allies might make to the attorney on behalf of survivors to clarify legal information.
- 11 Locating interpreting resources may be easier said than done. Survivors will usually have trusted bilingual people in their circles who may be pulled in. Otherwise, safe, vetted comrades from the community who are willing to help out may be recruited (e.g., from local INCITE! chapters or other conscious activist groups). In some communities, there are volunteer activist interpreter circles (e.g., Boston Interpreters' Collective). Whatever avenue is chosen, check for conflicts of interest and be sure confidentiality agreements are made.
- 12 We define “conscientization” as consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality.

APPENDIX

CREATING COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS: A PULL-OUT GUIDE

Below is an abbreviated pull-out guide of summary points that can be used in a wide variety of supportive actions or interventions for loved ones facing intimate violence within our activist communities or otherwise.

TABLE 1

Suggested Practices for Organizing Solidarity Teams

- The survivor drives the process, with the support of her/his trusted community allies.
- The survivor selects and vets who becomes part of her/his support community, including those introduced to her/him by allies.
- The survivor is central to all decisions that are made. S/he knows her/his safety, emotional, and logistical needs the best.
- It is helpful to appoint a “coordinator” of the support team to streamline and ensure smooth and timely communication among all members. This “coordinator” is probably someone other than the survivor. The coordinator should be someone who is efficient, consistent, reliable, organized, and detail-focused who can keep track of deadlines and is good at scheduling and anticipating logistical needs while being tuned into the group’s emotional and practical needs.
- A decision-making process should be discussed early on in the formation of a support team.
- Survivor (and supporter) safety should be a priority for all.
- There should be open, respectful, and healthy dialogue, strategizing, and debate pertaining to physical and emotional safety and health as well as economic, immigration and legal soundness.
- Survivors’ decisions should be respected, even if the team members don’t fully understand or are uncomfortable with the decision.
- If there are children or other family members/loved ones directly impacted by the violence, their needs and voices should be considered as well.

- For multilingual support teams, interpreting support needs to be made available to all members at all times, to accommodate the full participation of all.
- It must be ensured that the confidentiality of communication be sacred and maintained within the ally group. This, of course, is crucial for maintaining the safety, trust, accountability, and integrity of the process.
- Each team member should be realistic about what they can offer. Do not overcommit. It is crucial to maintain complete reliability, consistency, and accountability so as not to violate trust with survivor and comrades.
- Never assume that everyone on the support team, including the survivor, are on exactly the same page around values, ideology, and politics. Assume the need to start with a group discussion on the basics of anti-oppression work. Part of the "process" toward safety and liberation is the unpacking of issues of power, privilege, and oppression together as a team and working toward consensus-building and/or respecting differences.
- Honor the process and have patience with it. The work of relationship- and trust-building takes time and happens over time. One cannot rush the process. It has to evolve, with its high points and low points.
- Don't give up without putting forth your best effort. Stick with the process and give your all to building this process and creating communities of support.

TABLE 2

Tools for Being a Good Ally

- Listen fully, effectively, actively, and emphatically.
- Maintain the survivor's confidence and resist the urge to disclose the story to others, unless the survivor gives permission (and there is a strategic reason to disclose to a particular person, i.e., someone who can help the survivor).
- Provide non-judgmental and supportive counseling.
- For those with expertise in the law or other systems, offer helpful information in clear and simple language.

- Assess physical and psychological safety and risk at every step of intervention.
- Assist survivors in strategizing and prioritizing while in crisis and when encountering the systems or situations that may become involved as a result of the abuse (and frequently with timelines beyond her control, e.g., court dates and hearings).
- If a survivor-trusted and vetted support team is formed, ensure that the team coordinates information and facilitates communications well, and ensure that the same is done with key services that the survivor may end up interfacing with.
- Engage in community anti-violence and oppression work, prevention, and education.
- Participate in developing policy, legislative, and/or community-based support that is aware and sensitive to the experiences of those who have survived violence.
- If appropriate and relevant, and in partnership with the survivor, work proactively with the media to simultaneously publicize the prevalence of violence as a social issue (while protecting necessary individual and community privacy).
- Always remember—the SURVIVOR knows her/his safety and situation the best. Don't second guess or pressure her/him to act before her/his time or before s/he is ready.

TABLE 3

Survivor Vulnerability Factors

- Social isolation and depression.
- Loss of friends or colleagues and/or facing community backlash due to disclosure of abuse by a well-loved activist.
- Self-doubt and internalization of responsibility for the abuse.
- Blaming of oneself for "allowing" the abuse to happen, e.g., "as an activist, I should've seen the signs."
- Loss of trust in the community. Not being believed. Being judged.

- Feelings of responsibility for protecting the abuser (of color or queer, particularly) from additional scrutiny and repression by an already oppressive system.
- The couple may have children together, which makes divorce or separation much more complicated.
- Economic disadvantage or impact from abuse—loss of job, bankruptcy, ruined credit, holding a minimum wage job, paying costly attorney fees for divorce.
- Survivor may be dependent on a two-person income for affordable housing, health insurance, etc.
- Experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, or other forms of institutionalized oppression.
- Laws and systems that establish neither safety nor justice for survivors—e.g., limited rights for survivors/victims, inability to get time off from work to attend multiple court hearings, little/no financial compensation for days off work to attend court dates or appointments, childcare limitations.
- Survivor may be dependent on partner for immigration status—e.g., survivor may be undocumented, a dependant spouse of a US citizen abuser, or reliant on a work visa (H1B) at a job where the abuser is the employer.
- Survivor may hold an H2B visa (dependent spouse of H1B visa-holder) which doesn't offer work authorization to be able to live self sufficiently.
- Survivor may be undocumented, and therefore afraid to draw any attention to her/himself by reporting abuse for fear of being reported to immigration and deported.
- Language barriers—literacy in English and/or native language—where most resources and helping services are monolingual and frequently print-based.
- New immigrant status may result in survivor being relatively unfamiliar with US laws, social rules, culture, language, and institutional and social systems.

TABLE 4

Risk-Assessment Checklist: Information to Gather in the Wake of a Crisis

- Survivor safety: extreme depression, suicidal feelings, substance use, medical conditions, mental health crisis. Does the person need additional, professional support?
- Primary abusive partner information and history: lethality, access to weapons, criminal history, accomplices, substance use, mental health history, suicide risk, homicidal risk. Remember that in domestic violence situations, the critical point of safety risk for the survivor is often when the survivor takes a step to set boundaries against the abusive person, or leaves. This is when the stalking and homicide rates often go up.
- Safety of family and loved ones—children, parents, relatives, neighbors, colleagues: Are they at risk of being harmed by the perpetrator? Are they colluders in the abuse? Assess each group for safety, supportiveness, and/or liability to client.
- Safety of community, e.g., friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, care providers, ethnic community, and so on: Are they at risk of being harmed by the abusive person? Are they colluders in the abuse? Assess each group for safety, supportiveness, and/or liability to client.
- Are there other perpetrators of violence in the survivor's life?
- Effectiveness and quality of care from systems and care providers: Are service agencies and institutions that the survivor may have to interface with (e.g., courts, legal services, health care facilities) trained to be and sensitized around working with trauma survivors? Are the services and environment culturally and linguistically competent to meet the survivor's needs? Are there issues of institutional or historical oppression, such as racism, classism, xenophobia, ableism, heterosexism, or sexism that the client may encounter within helping systems?