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Love, Care, and Mutual Aid: Resisting State Violence and Reliance: A Reflective Piece

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Love, Care, and Mutual Aid: Resisting State Violence and Reliance: A Reflective Piece

Baljit Kaur and Samantha Pointon

‘Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them’¹

Introduction

The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the failures of several governments across the globe, including the UK, to effectively tackle the extreme threats to people’s lives and ways of life. In increasingly unsettling times, an essential need to explore alternatives to state reliance is becoming endlessly apparent. Mutual aid in praxis allows for the creation of spaces to share knowledge, resources, and raise awareness across diverse communities and individuals. In his comprehensive book on mutual aid, Dean Spade highlights how mutual aid at its best creates novel ways of existing, whereby individuals can develop systems that work for them and their wider community, addressing harm and fostering well-being in ‘systems of care and generosity’.²

The project was pursued with the intention of creating an essential bridge between community and academia in challenging institutional oppression and politicising the personal. This has been fundamental in aiding an understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of mutual aid and how they can be brought to life in spaces in which such dialogue is happening. We, therefore, begin this reflective piece by providing examples of different mutual aid groups, followed by a more in-depth discussion of a six-week ‘Love, Care and Mutual Aid: Resisting State Violence and Reliance’ project facilitated by Dr Jade Lee,³ Baljit Kaur,⁴ and Samantha Pointon.⁵ Crucially, it was through the collaboration of all contributors, that is, the organisers of the project, facilitators of sessions and attendees alike, that the mutuality of this

¹ Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the next)* (London: Verso, 2020a), p. 7.

² Spade, 2020a, p. 1.

³ CHASE and SOAS University alumna.

⁴ Doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex.

⁵ Doctoral researcher at the University of Essex (2022).

series could be nurtured and developed throughout. It is here that we would like to give special thanks to all those who participated. Fundamentally, while the series was a mutual and collective endeavour, this article is based on the interpretations of two of the organisers, who thus take sole responsibility for any shortcomings of what follows.

Moreover, reflexivity is not only a key tenet underpinning feminist academic research but also key to feminist praxis. Thus, to exemplify the collaborative nature of this project, we reflect on the presentations and subsequent questions and discussions that arose during and after the series. We also reflect on the limitations of this project and the future potential of mutual aid using the platform created throughout this series. In so doing, we highlight why it is essential to practice mutual aid principles in everyday life and continue applying a critical lens to systemic institutional oppression inside and outside of academic spaces.

Connection in Different Forms: What Can Mutual Aid Look Like?

Mutual aid groups often form in the face of specific oppression or issue, frequently evolving beyond their original mandates to tackle numerous instances of social injustice. One example of such a group is the feminist direct-action group, Sisters Uncut, whose official mandate is ‘taking direct action for domestic violence services’.⁶ The group emphasises how being a collective means there is no hierarchy, no leaders and all decisions are made via a process called ‘consensus decision making’, which, via the use of a Safer Spaces Policy, provides all members of the collective an equal say in all matters.⁷ In praxis, this encompasses a variety of areas to maintain the safety and security of group members, whilst ensuring all voices are heard in a ‘survivor-centred’ approach. These areas cover consent, being aware of one’s privileges, a culture of ‘calling out’ and learning from one’s mistakes, acknowledging and appreciating other’s labour, security-based safety assurances and community accountability.⁸ Thus, Sisters Uncut uphold a strict policy to maintain the centrality of all women and non-binary people, their safety, and

⁶ Sisters Uncut, ‘Sisters Uncut: Taking direct action for domestic violence services. FAQs’, *Sisters Uncut* (2020) <<<https://www.sistersuncut.org/faqs/>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

⁷ Sisters Uncut, ‘FAQs’ (2020).

⁸ Sisters Uncut, ‘Safer Spaces Policy’, *Sisters Uncut* (2020) <<https://www.sistersuncut.org/saferspaces/>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

their equal ability to contribute, to the collective⁹. Sisters Uncut have been highly involved in recent protests; one example of this can be seen in their response to the over-policing during the Sarah Everard vigil in March 2021 and ‘routine and systemic violence against women in the police force’.¹⁰ There are further examples of mutual aid groups such as Palestine Action;¹¹ however, discussing each of these would go beyond the scope of this article.

Love, Care, and Mutual Aid: Resisting State Violence and Reliance

Sharing a collective disdain for institutional and systemic injustices, the purpose of the Love, Care and Mutual Aid project was first and foremost to forge an online space that brought women doctoral researchers together.¹² Our sessions were accessible via Zoom once a week across six consecutive weeks; this platform was the most accessible to doctoral researchers, whilst restrictions to in-person interactions continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project sought to foreground the concept of mutual aid; the collective coordination to meet each other’s needs emerging from an awareness that the systems we have in place, indeed created by capitalism and colonialism, are not going to meet them.¹³ Meeting each other’s survival needs derives from the understanding that the conditions within which we are living are unjust; they often create the crisis or make things worse.¹⁴ Additionally, it is these systems that seek to and benefit from delinking and isolating us and drives the very individualism that underpins neoliberal thinking.¹⁵ The collectivity and community that arose from this project is, as Olufemi argues, one antidote to state violence; it brought hope and a need and desire to work together towards common interests of resisting state violence and oppression through discussions and friendship. It is this idea and

⁹ ‘Our meetings should be inclusive and supportive spaces for all women (trans, intersex and cis) and all nonbinary, agender and gender variant people’. ‘Sisters Uncut, ‘Safer Spaces Policy’ (2020) <<https://www.sistersuncut.org/saferspaces/>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

¹⁰ Sisters Uncut, ‘Sisters Uncut raise the alarm on police violence against women’, *Sisters Uncut* (2021) <<https://www.sistersuncut.org/2021/11/02/sisters-uncut-deliver-formal-complaint-on-police-violence-against-women/>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

¹¹ Palestine Action, ‘Take Direct Action Against Apartheid’, *Palestine Action* (n.d.) <<https://palestineaction.org/>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

¹² All women (trans, intersex and cis) and all non-binary, agender and gender variant people.

¹³ Spade, 2020a.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lola Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

practice that is entirely antithetical to individualism and this will be unpacked and examined further in the following sections of this review.¹⁶

Parallel to the forging of this community space, the discussion element of the sessions was imperative to the critical questioning of the state that has long propped up and maintained sexist oppression.¹⁷ In a similar fashion to Sisters Uncut, it was a space to ask ‘what the fuck is happening around us? Who is in power and what are they doing with it?’¹⁸ It was an opportunity to think against and beyond the state.¹⁹ As we unearthed from a ‘Sharing Feminist Research and Practice’ event at the University of Sussex in February 2021,²⁰ in which university responses to domestic violence was the central focus, women doctoral researchers were forthcoming about politicising the personal with an understanding of the ways in which our personal experiences of gender-based violence was both racialised and classed. Responding to these needs, the project offered space to ‘speak out’ against these issues and engage with the subsequent breaking free, sharing of experiences, understanding and resistance that stems from it.²¹ Fundamentally central to feminist politics, it is the putting it ‘out there’ as opposed to the keeping it ‘in here’ that ultimately challenges the perpetuation of sexist oppression and (re)production of silence.²²

State Violence against Women

The emergence of the project derived from an accumulation of events, the most recent of which had occurred only a month prior to the initial organising of the series. On the evening of 3 March 2021, 33-year-old Sarah Everard disappeared in South London, walking home from a friend’s house near Clapham Common. On 10 March 2021, her remains were discovered in woodland near Ashford, Kent. Wayne Couzens, a Metropolitan Police officer, has since pleaded guilty to the kidnapping, rape and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 33.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The session was facilitated by Baljit Kaur and Sam Pointon and the presentation was entitled: ‘Building Communities in Response to Domestic Violence during Lockdown’.

²¹ Alison Phipps, *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

²² Phipps, 2020.

murder of Sarah Everard.²³ Amidst the investigations, social media platforms such as Twitter flooded with personal accounts of gender-based violence, from stalking to harassment to the multiple ways in which women and those who identify as such resort to keeping themselves and others safe in public spaces. There were also accounts of deep mistrust of the police from many women and it is important to note here how police in the UK operate without nearly as much scrutiny and consequence as almost all other public servant professions. At the time of writing, only two police officers (including Couzens) have been successfully prosecuted for the murder or manslaughter of a person in police custody, or after contact with police, since records began in 1969.²⁴ The deep systematic problems that arise when those in positions of power are provided immunity and are able to continue building systems of oppression, in which the most vulnerable continue to be marginalised and silenced, were often central to the discussions.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic not only heightened feelings of isolation and loneliness but exacerbated feelings of angst, frustration and anger. The sexist state's provision and allocation of resources, for example, has long reinforced gendered oppression and this has continued during the pandemic with reports of domestic violence in the UK accelerating simultaneously with the ongoing closure of women's refuges as a direct result of violent austerity measures.²⁵ This only further reifies that in this context, it is women who are harmed, die and ultimately are hit the hardest due to state negligence and underfunding.²⁶ Worse still, our universities were and are not being held accountable for failing to respond with urgent support and interventions for students and staff who are experiencing domestic violence, despite recommendations from the University UK briefings.²⁷ These failings for the care and well-being of students have been further exemplified in videos circulating on social media less than two weeks after the death of Sarah Everard, in which police officers could be seen to be aggressively and violently handling students on university campus. Instances of violence at the hands of the police

²³ Dominic Casciani, 'Sarah Everard's murder and the questions the Met Police now face', *BBC News* (2021) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-58772787>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

²⁴ FullFact, 'We know of one successful conviction of a police officer for the killing on someone in police custody since 1971', *FullFact* (2020) <<https://fullfact.org/crime/prosecutions-deaths-police-custody/>> [accessed 02 February 2022].

²⁵ Women's Aid, 'A Perfect Storm', *Women's Aid* (2020) <<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/a-perfect-storm-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-domestic-abuse-survivors-and-the-services-supporting-them/>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

²⁶ Olufemi, 2020.

²⁷ Universities UK, 'Beginning the Conversation' (2020) <<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/beginning-conversation>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

have also existed alongside disturbing stories of police officers bursting into students' rooms in campus accommodation.²⁸

Moreover, on a more systemic level, the university perpetuates state violence by creating a hostile environment, particularly for Muslim communities, who are likely to be subjected to increased surveillance and discrimination due to Prevent policies,²⁹ and Black students who are more likely to be subjected to racial profiling,³⁰ the state's enactment of violence towards Black women and women of colour on and off university grounds is by no means new. Olufemi highlights state killings of Black women because of coming into contact with the police and/or the prison system in the cases of Dorothy Grace in 1985, Cynthia Jarratt in 1985, Joy Gardner in 1993 and Sarah Reed, who died in 2016, whose cases we discussed in session five and Annabelle Landsburg in 2017.³¹ These are just some of the women who have lost their lives a result of state violence and does not account for the countless working-class migrant women at Yarl's Wood,³² one of eight detention centres across the country,³³ whose mistreatment also encompasses sexual violence at the hands of guards.³⁴ It is through these themes and discussions that we opened the series and as we highlight in the following sections, were revisited throughout.

The development of our discussions of hostile environments and anti-racism continued over the series, with contributors presenting on the theme more broadly in different contexts, including decolonising community arts spaces, the housing sector, schools and the media. In session two, for example, the discussion focused on the problematic nature of performative anti-racist practice in art spaces, including institutions such as museums, such that opportunities for marginalised artists are often tokenistic and do not provide concrete opportunities for Black artists and artists of colour. Attendees

²⁸ Sussex UCU, 'Why Inviting Police onto Campus is Not Reassuring', *Sussex UCU* (2021) <<https://ucusussex.wixsite.com/ucusussex/post/why-inviting-police-onto-campus-is-not-reassuring>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

²⁹ Prevent is part of a government counter-terrorism strategy. 'Its aim is to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism', *Gov.uk*, 'Prevent Strategy' (2011), p. 6 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-strategy-2011>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

³⁰ Sussex UCU, 2020.

³¹ Rebecca Omonira-Oyekanmi and Wasi Daniju, 'Remember Sarah Reed', *Open Democracy* (2016), <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/shine-a-light/remembering-sarah-reed/>> [accessed 4 February 2022]; Olufemi, 2020.

³² 'A fully contained residential centre housing adult women and adult family groups awaiting immigration clearance', *Serco*, 'Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre' (2021) <<https://www.serco.com/uk/sector-expertise/immigration/yarls-wood-irc>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

³³ Olufemi, 2020.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

of the session were asked to think about the question: ‘How does providing a young Black artist a small amount of money and a limited platform in an institution that is mostly represented by white officials actively deconstruct hegemonic ideals within art and practice?’. This discussion subsequently gave rise to considerations for the future of the project regarding how to raise awareness and accessibility of the project beyond a simply performative manner, which we will return to later in this article.

Moreover, a core element of fighting sexism and racism and the silence that surrounds them in institutions and beyond is thus to unapologetically reveal the injustices and, importantly, the impact they have on the most marginalised in our society. To exemplify, session four explored the treatment of Shamima Begum in British media and government official discourse as demonstrating a process of ‘othering’, whereby individuals whose identity exists outside of a socially constructed ‘norm’ are segregated and marginalised.³⁵ The ‘othering’ of Begum in the British press and in British governmental discourse directly impacted her treatment, constructing her as a national security risk and sparked a debate as to whether she should be ‘allowed’ to return to the UK. Begum’s connection to the Muslim faith, her ethnicity, and her participation with ISIS allowed key political figures and media platforms to create a narrative about her that designated her as distinctly un-British and a danger to British society; an undeserving ‘imperfect victim’.³⁶ Part of revealing the injustices here was to collectively centralise the power of the media in writing destructive narratives, particularly regarding those who most require love, care, and compassion in dangerous times.

Preceding this discussion, we also explored violence against girls in the context of early years education. This brought to the forefront how our exceptionally gendered education of young children has implications for the way in which they perceive their own and ‘other’ genders. Moreover, the session lent to an exploration of the types of messages young children receive about women’s bodily autonomy and sociocultural worth alongside male ‘rights’ of access and the subsequent effect this can have from childhood to adulthood. It also provided an opportunity for doctoral researchers to collectively share

³⁵ Zuleyka Zevallos, ‘What is Otherness?’ *Other Sociologist* (2011) <<https://othersociologist.com/otherness-resources/>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

³⁶ Frida Garvill, ‘A naive victim or a willing ISIS devotee? —Deserving or losing your human rights’ (Master’s dissertation, Stockholm University, 2020).

their experiences of problematic education as either parents and/or guardians of children. Our collective endeavour to share and discuss both differing and difficult experiences in response to the deeply systemic sexist education that harms all genders from a very early age highlighted the ability for mutual aid projects to cultivate solidarity through learning from others in mutual aid environments.³⁷

Mutual Aid, not Mutual Struggle: Imagining Feminist Futures

Importantly, as Olufemi writes, becoming aware of state violence and injustices can be overwhelming, disheartening, and impossible to think of alternatives. Creating a community space online was thus fundamentally underpinned by a feminist understanding and ethics of care and the mutual and collective provision of emotional support and aid not only during the sessions but throughout the duration of the series. To exemplify this, we responded to ongoing events at the time, which was marked by renewed violence against Palestinians during June 2021. In line with mutual aid practice, we shared access to free resources, eBooks, and information regarding direct-action that attendees would find useful, such as the locations and times of protests in the UK. Importantly, we ensured there was space for discussion about the situation and the deep feelings it evoked for those who were and were not familiar with the Israeli occupation. During the break, we found it helpful to lighten the atmosphere with more creative expressions from artists and political activists such as Lowkey,³⁸ who continues to raise awareness on the matter.

The series gave the community of women doctoral researchers the space to say the unsayable, to think about the impossible, explore and discuss, and crucially, to hope in imagining utopian feminist futures.³⁹ In light of this, the presentation in session five encouraged the group to think about police and prison abolition; stemming from this we imagined what different visions of safety and justice could look like and the ways in which we could continue to keep each other safe, built on cooperation and mutual

³⁷ Dean Spade, 'Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival', *Social Text* 142, (2020b), p. 137.

³⁸ Lowkey (2019), 'Long Live Palestine ft Frankie Boyle, Maverick Sabre (Part 3) [Music Video] | GRM Daily', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhEFrv-Xwtw>> [accessed 1 February 2022]. Lowkey, whose real name is Kareem Dennis, is a British rapper and activist from London.

³⁹ Olufemi, 2020.

aid as opposed to individualism and self-preservation.⁴⁰ We were urged to ask the question, ‘How do we continue developing these spaces of care, in order to achieve the future we desire?’⁴¹

By session five, the accumulation of knowledge we had collectively acquired aided us in making those crucial links between defunding and/or abolishing the police and reallocating resources to the education and housing sector, for example, the latter of which was the focal topic of session three’s presentation. As Kaba writes, ‘If we did this, there would be less need for the police in the first place.’⁴² Reallocating resources would ultimately be an important step forward in tackling the issue of homelessness and the impact this has on many women who turn to sex work due to destitution. The emergency response to homelessness during the pandemic to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 highlights how it is possible to house the UK’s homeless population.⁴³ However, emergency measures are not enough, and the actions in response to the threat to public health, rather than in response to protecting homeless individuals and ensuring they have safety and security, indicates a position that is purely self-preservative, and thus entirely antithetical to mutual aid principles. In this way, mutual aid principles regarding the reallocation of resources in a manner that goes beyond the self-serving elites can offer the potential for beginning to solve the homelessness crisis and ensure that no individual is left without a safe and secure living environment.

The finale to our series was fuelled with the sense of hope from our previous session and defined largely by an element of reflexivity. Contributors joined the session whilst in the virtual presence of a twenty-first-century jazz singer who writes songs for social change from the perspective and positionality of a young Black woman in the UK. Her songs centred themes of (self) love, trauma and therapy and violence towards marginalised groups and the Black community. In-between the songs were ongoing discussions and reflections of how we could continue to nourish and develop our community of love, care and mutual aid. Some of the suggestions included connecting outside of the academic space, book

⁴⁰ Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

⁴¹ Kaba, 2021.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴³ Beth Watts, ‘Re-thinking Homelessness Prevention’, *Local Government Association* (2021) <<https://www.local.gov.uk/re-thinking-homelessness-prevention>> [accessed 2 February 2022].

clubs, connecting with similar academic networks, and broadening the network/project so that it could be accessible to members of the wider community.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

As we have highlighted throughout this article, in May 2021 we embarked on a project to apply the concept of mutual aid to disrupting silences around sexism, especially those maintained by the state and institutions in the UK. We commenced each session with an outline of a safe space policy to ensure all attendees remained aware of their privileges, did not share stories without consent, and always remained respectful. A key strength of the mutual aid project was in our efforts to maintain a facilitative element. Attempts to mitigate a hierarchical structure to the weekly sessions were made by encouraging attendee-led discussions. Whilst we arranged for presentations each week, we did not dictate the conversation and did not prevent discussions from travelling wherever attendees felt they needed to go.

However, while all contributions were valued by facilitators and attendees alike, the small amount of funding received for the project was offered to facilitators for their time in delivering presentations and subsequent activities. We recognise that this undermines the mutual aid principles of this project.⁴⁴ We also recognise that much of the organising ahead of the series and in-between sessions was carried out by the three organisers of the project, as opposed to as many people making decisions and organising as possible. Nonetheless, in the final session of the series, we asked for people's suggestions and input on future themes, discussions and ideas for the development of this project and, more broadly, mutual aid spaces that could be developed across other communities elsewhere. This was also followed up with a questionnaire that would fulfil a similar purpose.

One area of improvement required for future sessions is in ensuring they are more accessible. As was discussed in session two of the series, we all learnt a significant amount about the harm that comes from performative anti-racism and, in turn, attempts to ensure events, talks and environments, for example, are as accessible and discoverable to those from all backgrounds, not just white and/or academic.

⁴⁴ Spade, 2020a.

Session two of the series emphasised that ‘diversity and inclusivity’ policies can appear as facades that do not ensure concrete inclusion across social groups. Thus, it is important that the development of this and other similar projects do not follow the problematic line that still ends up excluding women across the intersections of race, class and sexuality.

Additionally, the sessions were open only to women doctoral students, fundamentally to ensure that it remained a safe space for women to discuss their experiences. The sessions were also limited to thirty people to ensure that the number of attendees would be manageable and conducive to more intimate conversations, particularly for the first run of the project. However, these elements also carry limitations in the accessibility of the sessions for those outside of the academic community, which as the series itself argued, is distinctly Western, white, and often only accessible to a privileged few. For future sessions, we encourage more scope to collaborate with other networks that have similar visions, engage with our communities more widely and ensure that they are accessible to non-students.

Another World is Possible: Conclusion

Central to feminist politics, the project emerged from the action of speaking out.⁴⁵ It mirrored consciousness-raising groups and reflected principles of mutual aid. Through a commitment to communication, dialogue, and solidarity, such community groups, as Olufemi writes, ‘can be utilised to help us imagine things that don’t seem possible yet’.⁴⁶ Participants gain the strength to challenge capitalist and patriarchal forces and thus a commitment to political action.⁴⁷ As Spade highlights, collective action is the way forward.⁴⁸ Furthermore, it is also through these discussions that we were able to reconnect and forge new friendships in a time of physical isolation. To offer solidarity in light of the ways in which we have been impacted by the issues raised in the series, and that in some ways were exacerbated by the pandemic. The project was fundamentally a reminder to continue creating spaces and creative ways to

⁴⁵ Phipps, 2020.

⁴⁶ Olufemi, 2020.

⁴⁷ Hooks, 2000.

⁴⁸ Spade, 2020a.

oppose, challenge and fight the injustices; to reveal them and refuse to participate in them. Taken from Kaba's recent writing, we conclude this article with a quote:

Community matters. Collectivity matters. To me that's the whole thing. And if we can't get along with each other, and we can't take responsibility for what we do with each other, then what the hell are we doing? For me, that's the bottom line. If anybody is listening to this who is a young person working in this moment, please be part of the community of folks who are building an accountable community with each other.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Kaba, 2021, p. 175.

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