The violence unleashed on September 11 has radically altered the political stage by raising questions about the relevance of routine political work in the U.S. Compared to the enormous tragedy of September 11, this year’s Domestic Violence Awareness Month (October) seems insignificant. I find myself asking: Is violence against women a relevant concern for all? Has the domestic violence movement made itself relevant to the broader calls for a safe and peaceful world?

Over 1000 women are killed by their intimate partners a year. Estimates of women who are physically abused by their husband or boyfriend climb as high as three million annually. Commenting on September 11 in the context of Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Esta Soler, the Executive Director of Family Violence Prevention Fund, said, “The nation has been fundamentally changed…. It will take time to understand and address all the changes, but we know that as a movement, we have to carry on because the women and children who are facing domestic violence count on us to do so.”

She is right, but what exactly does “carrying on” entail? How is the domestic violence movement to remain relevant considering not only the violence from military warfare, but also the danger of erosion of civil liberties which will first affect communities of color and poor people?

We can find some answers by going back to the days prior to September 11.

One evening in 1997, in the US-Mexico border town of Nogales, Border Patrol agents pounded at the home of a woman, her child (both US citizens) and her husband (a permanent resident). When the husband answered the door, says a lawyer’s complaint filed on their behalf, “one of the agents burst in. Once inside, the agents asked [the man] for his papers and then proceeded to confront the frightened child and mother, screaming for ‘papers.’ The agents proceeded to search the house without ever asking for permission from anyone in the house. They acted as if the [family members] were under arrest and the agents had the absolute right to go through [their] personal property and rooms without permission.”

As a result of the trauma of this incident, the woman of the house,
who was two months pregnant, miscarried within forty-eight hours.

Another incident comes from a case report filed by Bay Area Police Watch. In August 1999 in San Francisco, the police burst into a house belonging to an African American woman. They pulled out their guns and went up the stairs without permission, yelling, cursing, and scaring her young son. They were apparently looking for a man who did not live there. They had no search warrant and informed the woman that they did not need one as they could do whatever they wanted.

These women certainly faced violence in the home – though the violence does not fit the conventional definition of domestic violence as a male partner’s violence against a woman. How relevant is the domestic violence movement to such women?

Over the past thirty years, the domestic violence movement has thrust into public consciousness many types of violence whose existence was previously denied or trivialized. The achievements of domestic violence organizations are historic, involving significant changes in police and court practices and legal standards, as well as a profound transformation of public awareness.

Today, however, many women who are or were part of the movement are expressing dismay as young women on college campuses, though struggling with issues of intimate violence, seem to be more inspired by the movements against sweatshops or the prison-industrial complex.

The domestic violence movement is filled with hard-working organizations that continue to struggle against enormous odds to provide services, reform the criminal justice system, and lobby governments. But, notes Andrea Smith, one of the organizers of last year’s influential Color of Violence Conference, “professional service has eclipsed political organizing as the main work of domestic violence and sexual assault organizations.” Despite past successes, the struggle now seems to be treading water.

This is not an easy place to find ourselves. How do we constructively critique while celebrating successes, renew while retaining the best achievements?

Such questioning is often choked off by the challenges posed by the continual emergence of domestic violence survivors in crises. Renewal and rethinking can be hard for social workers and activists on the frontlines. Yet, unless this “movement” is re-energized and re-constituted, the needs of the survivors themselves will be ill-served in the long run, and only partially fulfilled in the short.

“Law and Order” Problem?
The mainstream domestic violence movement has sought to protect women from battering by advocating for a more active response from police agencies and the criminal justice system. The underlying assumption of this strategy is the conviction that there is value in making domestic violence a “law and order” problem.

Police trainings promoted and administered by domestic violence organizations have brought about undeniable improvements in the way police respond to domestic violence calls. In some ways, however, this strategy of reform has backfired. Women who turn to police for protection from battering may still face humiliation or abuse from officers, encouragement of the batterer, wrongful arrest of the woman as the primary aggressor, deportation of the batterer against the woman’s wishes (in the case of immigrant families), and disproportionate arrests of men of color.

In the eager pursuit of protection by the government, the domestic violence movement has largely sidestepped the problem of the violent and abusive nature of law enforcement in poor immigrant and U.S.-born communities of color. The supposed privacy and sanctity of the home are very relative concepts, whose application is heavily conditioned by racial and economic status.

In researching enforcement violence against women, I have documented how women of color—primarily but not exclusively—routinely face the intrusion of law enforcement agencies into their homes in the pursuit of drug or immigration raids, often on the flimsiest of legal grounds.1 Human rights organizations and police watch groups across the country have documented many cases of homes being invaded and searched without notice and
family members being deported if they were unable to produce appropriate identification.

Communities of color today are mobilizing around issues such as the violence and bias of immigration agencies and the criminal justice system. Not surprisingly, the over-reliance on law enforcement has placed domestic violence organizations on a tense footing with groups that fight against violence by law enforcement agencies, many of which are led by women. These tensions can be especially heightened in the new context of exponential increases in the authority and scale of law enforcement, and dramatic restrictions in civil liberties.

“Community” Comes Last
The larger culture in which we live compartmentalizes private and public life. The domestic violence movement seems to want to break down these compartments and create collective solutions—to make public the so-called private issue of domestic violence. Yet, the strategies of domestic violence organizations continue to spotlight the home and the individual survivor in a way that repeatedly reinforces the isolation and private-ness of both.

Most domestic violence organizations base their strategies on the conviction that the home is the most important site for detection, protection, and prevention. Their tactics are largely determined by this focus on the home—it is the space that needs to be entered, from which the woman must be extracted, within which existing relationships need to be changed. Domestic violence organizations engage with the community through education and programs which are aimed mainly at informing people of the ways in which intervention within the home is possible, rather than at actively involving community members in addressing violence.

This focus on the home leads to organizations’ reliance on the agencies of the government as the only powers that can enter the home without jeopardizing its widely recognized private status. While necessary and sometimes preferable to other options, there are dangers in an over-reliance on governmental law and order interventions.

In addition, many aspects of the work done by domestic violence organizations—for example, shelters or their procedures of confidentiality—reinforce the culture of individualism. They create for survivors a space that is removed not only from the home but also from the familiar world the woman belongs to (her city block, place of worship, place of work, etc.). In gaining her safety, the woman loses her world.

Again and again, in practice as well as in conviction, “home” and “individual” trump “community” as the axes for organizing, mobilizing, conceptualizing.

Re-orient and Re-organize
The prioritizing of home and individual over community and the demand for more state protection (i.e. more law enforcement) have displaced critical and innovative thinking about alternative community-based strategies for promoting public safety. No one would dispute that women’s safety should be fundamental to the women’s movement; the issue is how this safety is best achieved.

A view of home as a place that is vulnerable to so-called “private” violence (violence from intimate partners) as well as so-called “public” forms of violence (such as state violence) can help break the artificial public/private divisions in anti-violence work—divisions that are against the interests of immigrant and US-born poor women of color, and ultimately all women. It is inconsistent for us to think that we can demand protection from law enforcement on the one hand and organize around police brutality on the other.

Social transformation in past eras has taught us that a broad array of forces needs to engage with an issue to change it. At this point, the domestic violence work has become a single-issue, specialized area of work that is often quite disconnected from grassroots communities as well as other struggles and movements.

Domestic violence groups need to re-think their priorities and engage with community institutions and members in building a collective consensus about the basis of safe and healthy communities. The absence of domestic violence should be one of the pillars of such a consensus. Such consensus building would require strategies of
“grassroots community organizing” quite different from the dominant practices among domestic violence organizations which focus on service provision, training and reforming law enforcement, and beltway policy making.

Currently, domestic violence work does not sufficiently engage with grassroots community organizing. Organizing, at its best, requires the creation of thoughtful and mutually beneficial relationships through a process of confrontation and negotiation, among bodies and institutions that form the community. Through such relationships, the community develops the capacity to bring about change in the way business is done within it and towards it. Above all, it involves developing consent and consensus among the members of the communities for the larger good. In such a process, consent to eradicate domestic violence would need to arise out of a process that determines absence of such violence to be as integral to the welfare and survival of the community as a living wage, good public education, police accountability, or removal of toxic dumps.

Organizing requires fully accepting and working with the fact that survivors and batterers are part of a world at large. The only form of public accountability that has the power to guarantee the safety of women and justice for survivors is the resolve of the community to denounce such violence. For example, in a district that succeeds in developing a “community pact” to be a violence-free zone (through arduous negotiations and confrontations among community institutions), a domestic violence incident would be seen as a violation by a community member of that pact. Such a violation would provoke social, economic and moral consequences from the community that would be far more deterring than detention at the police station. It is only through the active and long-lasting involvement of the community, not endless crisis management, that the tide of violence will be turned back and the domestic violence movement will advance beyond its achieved successes.

Furthermore, since September 11, we have seen an uncritical celebration and expansion of the military and law enforcement machinery. We have also heard about “polls” claiming that Americans overwhelmingly support these vast changes. Missing in all this has been the full range of community views. Building the strength of community voices and involvement should be important for any social change movement. For a variety of reasons, it has now become unavoidable for the domestic violence movement.

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Endnote