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‘Calling out’ and the limitations of accountability processes

Rebecca Winter

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Recently, I’ve been getting into discussions about whether calling out perpetrators of sexual violence and their supporters is a useful tactic. Some people have suggested that calling out is often unhelpful and doesn’t allow healing to occur. Instead, they suggest that we should focus on less public ways of responding to sexual violence. Apparently, we need to have more compassion for perpetrators and belief in their ability to change.

It has become fairly common for people to criticise ‘calling out’, as though public criticism of the actions of others began with the invention of tumblr. Some of these criticisms come from a genuine desire to think about how we can build more effective cultures of criticism within the left. But all too often, people criticise calling out to avoid dealing with underlying disagreements about which actions are actually worth criticising in the first place.

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When it comes to calling out perpetrators of sexual violence, the criticisms often miss the mark. One problem is that it's often not clear what is really meant by calling out in the first place. Is someone calling someone else out if they tell their friends they were raped? Or if they name the perpetrator to those around them? What about if they talk about their experiences in a group environment? Or does calling out only refer to public Facebook or website posts?

Given this ambiguity, saying that calling out is unhelpful risks discouraging sexual violence survivors from speaking about their experiences. I worry that it will set up a hierarchy of the 'good' survivor who deals with their trauma in private, or with a small group of supporters, and the 'bad' survivor who talks publicly about their experiences and names the perpetrator. Our society already has an intense focus on and judgement of what survivors do in the aftermath of being assaulted. We need to be careful not to increase this by focusing on how publicly people talk about sexual violence.

The main reason why calling out can have bad consequences is that rape culture is still strong and thriving. Naming a perpetrator or speaking about sexual violence in public still often gets an extremely hostile response from friends of the perpetrator and others who wish to deny the prevalence and seriousness of sexual violence. We should be focusing on creating an environment in which survivors can speak about their experiences without having to endure shaming and hostility in response, rather than encouraging them not to publicly name the people who hurt them.

We must not underestimate the importance of calling out as a method of alerting people to the existence of perpetrators, if this is what the survivor wishes. The person who raped me tried to assault four other women before he raped me, but I didn't find out about this until it was too late. If there had been more open communication and if the people around him had not ignored his behaviour, then maybe he wouldn't have

been in the sort of environment where he could repeatedly try to assault women and get away with it. I certainly would have appreciated a warning or call out.

In opposition to calling out, accountability processes are sometimes presented as the ‘ideal’ way to respond to sexual violence. Accountability processes involve a “group that mediates between an individual and the person calling them out, or separate groups supporting each person and facilitating communication between them. These processes usually involve setting out conditions or ‘demands’ for the person who’s been called out as a means of restoring safety or trust and preventing the harm from happening again, and some method for following up to ensure that these demands are met” – Accounting For Ourselves.

Accountability processes are one (important) way we can attempt to respond to sexual violence in our communities, and some survivors have found this approach to be really useful. But we need to avoid presenting accountability processes as the best or only just way to respond to sexual violence. In practice, the sort of public calling out that some people seem to find most confronting often happens after the failure of accountability processes, or other less public ways of responding to sexual violence. Calling out a perpetrator of sexual violence in a public setting is typically a response to being unheard elsewhere.

It’s worth remembering that accountability processes carry their own risks and limitations. For instance, a rapist’s friends will often support them and respond to a survivor talking about their experience of violence by banding together to attempt to discredit the survivor. Accountability processes may not be possible in the context of this level of contempt. Multiple people I know have pursued accountability processes, but found that they provided the people who assaulted them with more opportunities to continue emotional and other forms of abuse.

One survivor was assaulted a second time while undergoing an accountability process.

Accountability processes can end up being used as a way of trying to deny the damage that has been done. If they are not directed by the wishes of the survivor, they can become a way for people to attempt to bring a perpetrator back into a space or community with a minimum of fuss, with no real attempt to respond to the survivor's needs.

Sometimes it is suggested that we should be 'calling in' perpetrators of sexual violence, rather than calling them out. In an influential article, Ngọc Loan Trần argues that we need to "let go of treating each other like not knowing, making mistakes, and saying the wrong thing make it impossible for us to ever do the right things." They suggest that we need to develop an ethic of calling in – the "practice of loving each other enough to allow each other to make mistakes." This idea has immense value when thinking about how to build a diverse collective politics against intersecting forms of oppression and exploitation. But the idea of calling in was never put forward as a way of addressing issues of sexual violence. In fact, it was presented with the explicit disclaimer that calling in is not meant to provide justification for a "fuckery free-for-all." Instead, it is meant to refer to building community with people who you can trust and find common ground with. But in many cases this basic level of trust is broken when people choose to perpetrate sexual violence. Trust can't always be repaired, especially given the lack of resources we have to spend the years that might be required to convince a hostile perpetrator that what they did was wrong. We need to remember that most cases of sexual violence are not a mistake or due to a misunderstanding, but happen because of a perpetrator's intentional or reckless disregard of another person's right to control their own body and sexuality.

I believe that people can change for the better, in general. But there's a big difference between thinking that people can

change, in a general sense, and thinking that particular perpetrators are likely to change in the foreseeable future, or that I should put my energy towards trying to get them to change.

The realisation that some people are unlikely to change or understand the damage they have done to others is a bitter one, but ignoring this can also be dangerous. The person who assaulted me went through a cycles of apologising for his actions and then trying to assault someone else (which I only found out after he raped me). I don't think I will ever trust that an apology from him is genuine. I don't trust that he will change given his pattern of sexual aggression towards women. And I don't think that this is because I lack compassion. Some people are too invested in sexual violence as a form of control for genuine change to be a believable prospect. Acknowledging this should not be seen as a failure of a survivor's character.

None of this means that accountability processes aren't worth pursuing, if that is what a survivor wants. It is important for us to put energy towards facilitating these processes for survivors who do want to try them. But it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of accountability processes and understand that it's not a lack of compassion that can make survivors decide not to take part in them. We need to support survivors in the variety of different (limited) ways people have found to cope with sexual violence, and this is going to include calling out and exclusion as well as accountability processes.

Further References:

Elizabeth Switaj, Why I Reject Forgiveness Culture.

For more on this topic see Rebecca's article from The Plat-form issue 1, Silent No Longer: Confronting Sexual Violence on the Left.