

# Rethinking Radicalism

Lori Michau

*in Off Our Backs: A Feminist Newsjournal, Vol. xxxii, No. 3 / 4, March-April 2002, p. 42 - 45.*

Women all over the world are not safe. The level of threat, intimidation, coercion and fear in women's lives makes it hard to remember that security of person is a fundamental human right. I am an American woman working in Tanzania and Uganda with Raising Voices, a project working with local organizations to prevent domestic violence. I have learned that the lives of women everywhere reflect the compromises, the concessions and the damage that the daily negotiation of safety entails. In East Africa it is not much different and many traditional practices, like FGM, widow inheritance, and bride price reveal even more extreme variations of oppression and violence. But the beating, rape, humiliation, and degradation and the more systemic violence of lack of access to education, health care, and family resources are all too familiar here as elsewhere in the world.

In Tanzania and Uganda the women's movements are still relatively young. There are even fewer resources and less access to communication and technology that help build and convey strong alternative voices. Headway has been made, particularly in policy circles with the existence of new, stricter laws that define various types of violence and in many cases impose strict punishments. Sometimes it seems that the movement here is following the pattern of the West, by focusing on laws, building shelters and providing services for women. Yet the track record of the so-called "developed" world isn't brilliant. The existence of shelters, help lines, NGOs, and counseling services in the US helps soften the reality, but violence against women is still rampant and still comes primarily from the men we sleep with and those with whom we try to construct our lives.

My own politicization is rooted in Western feminism and deeply influenced by women like Andrea Dworkin and other radical and courageous women who speak, write and live on the edge. Their activism and uncompromising commitment to say it like it is while being fully aware that it will provoke anger, outrage, and even dismissal resonates deeply within me. The language of rights is to

me, a truly empowering and transformative discourse. It gives women power, agency and courage. I believe it makes women individually safer. A politicized woman who knows and can assert her rights is more likely to reject direct and subtle violence or intimidation in relationships. She is more likely to choose a partner with whom she can create a mutual and equitable relationship. But does the language of rights make women collectively safer? As a feminist, my commitment is not only to my personal safety and quality of life, but that of other women. Solidarity with women extends my concern and my commitment to other women who are living under violence or the threat of it. Those perhaps with less access, heavier burdens, different beliefs, culture, ethnicity, perceptions and desires, are still fundamentally linked to me. My commitment then is not only to ensure my own ability to assert my rights-particularly to safety, but that the world is a safer place for all women.

This is all well and good in the abstract, but how does one go about actually doing this? Making the world - and in my case, communities in East Africa - actually safer places for women as a whole? The practical how-to of all of this seriously challenges my perceptions and propensities. The importance and value of empowering individual women with the language of rights is, to me, unquestionable. It is an essential cornerstone in building a women's movement, in improving the lives of individual women, and ending violence against women. I am also becoming increasingly convinced that this is not enough anywhere, but particularly within the communal environment of East Africa. The question of how to be practical in ensuring that women as a group are safer is integral to my work in domestic violence prevention in Tanzania and Uganda. The projects are undeniably pro-woman, while also recognizing that within the context of life here, the lives of women are inextricably linked to men. It is seriously challenging my Western "in your face" approach to women's rights and feminism. The fear is of selling out, and of losing one's or the movement's identity and strength in the process of building bridges.

The organizations we work with, the National Association of Women's Organizations in

Uganda (NAWOU) and Kivulini in Tanzania work with individual women and women's groups to promote the rights of women, especially the right to live free of violence. But this is not done in isolation. The larger approach is to work at the community level with police, health care workers, journalists, religious leaders, local government leaders, teachers, and just regular members of the community to actually affect people's hearts and minds. The approach challenges women and men to re-evaluate violence against women, how they relate with women and how they view women's fundamental value and dignity as human beings. The projects aim to facilitate the process of politicization at the community level. It is a challenging approach. It requires that we reach beyond women to other groups and institutions while supporting and encouraging women individually, keeping them at the center of the discourse and action always. Women come everyday to the project offices. They come uncertain, frightened, searching and hopeful. They know they are on the edge of something big, something important. They are afraid, but they are also courageous. Any effort must reach out to women in need, and there must be a reliable, safe, undeniably pro-woman space for women to find refuge. For example, a few weeks ago at our project offices we received a four page, anonymous letter from a woman who saw one of our staff members on TV talking about domestic violence. In the letter this woman pours out her heart, sharing, she says for the first time, the agony and despair that she lives under at the hands of her husband. She has seven children. After the fifth child her husband became mean, aggressive, and violent. She describes in vivid detail the humiliation and fear she lives under everyday. She agonizes over her lack of choices, telling us that she is in fear for her life. Then, she says "Thank you." She wants nothing, no financial assistance, legal advice, or counseling-only to feel in sisterhood with people who understand. She tells us that she and other women are there watching, waiting and ready. They are the reason for all the other efforts. No project, movement or effort can reach everyone, but there must be preventative work at the community level to change the climate, to change the collective beliefs that make communities dangerous for women. This is the real challenge. It is the most far-reaching in scope, and potentially most long-lasting. Personally, it has challenged me to redefine radicalism, to recast it within the practicalities of affecting real change. I used to think that radicalism was the starting place. Now I wonder if it is best as an

endpoint, or as the realization of other (sometimes seemingly innocuous) strategies and approaches. Trying to stop domestic violence against women in communities here has meant reframing the argument into safe families and family harmony. I used to fear that this would water down the essence of feminism, that this language was diluting the message, or weakening our position. But I also see the strength in this approach, and the way in which it can also be highly radical.

Radicalism, as we have come to think of it in the West, stretches our thinking with new, deeply challenging and alternative ideas which are practically and psychologically critical to the movement. Yet what about the most basic tenet of feminism-wouldn't the freedom from fear for our physical, sexual, emotional or economic safety actually be the most radical development of all? The shift for me is where the radicalism comes in. Maybe the emphasis should be shifted from the initiation of activism to its consequences.

Making bold assertions about women's rights in the context of many communities in East Africa scares people-women included. Rights remain statements, assertions to which others react along a spectrum of agreement or disagreement. People can take it or leave it. It has little personal consequence (if one chooses not to engage) and rights therefore essentially remain the "problem" of women. However, approaching domestic violence in the light of family safety, harmony or even happiness provokes dialogue. It doesn't automatically scare people or anger them. It may sound like a less powerful and radical stance, but we find that it has seriously radical potential. Even within this approach, the language of rights is a fundamental assertion that has to be retained. Women should never have to depend on the benevolence of men to achieve and enjoy what is inherently ours. Perhaps this movement is being more pragmatic and even radical if we are interested in truly affecting change for women collectively. If, in the end, through this approach, we create communities where women actually become safer, then they may have the opportunity to assert not only the right to live without violence but also the whole spectrum of rights and choices that is inherently theirs.

Two recent examples from activities in Kampala come to mind. The Domestic Violence Prevention Project recently held a seminar for journalists to encourage them to think about how they portray women in the media and the consequences it has on how women are perceived in the community. We invited a

member of a prominent women's NGO to give a presentation about the media's portrayal of women. The presentation laid out all the ways in which the media was hurting women, showed how advertisements sexualize women and how stories can rob women of dignity and put them at greater (individual and collective) risk of violence. She blasted journalists for being insensitive, for contributing to violence against women. Part of me sat listening and cheering her on. I thought "Yeah! Tell it like it is!" But of course the reaction of journalists (female and male) was predictable—they were defensive and angry. One man walked out. Some women were clearly pleased—and why not? It is deeply gratifying to hear the truth spoken unflinchingly, and after all, she was right! Yet the question that it raises is will it in any way make women safer? The only answer is a resounding no.

Alternatively, last week a group of around thirty, mostly male Law Enforcement Officers (informal community police), came to a meeting held by the Division Probation Officer who is working with our project. The topic was domestic violence and the discussion turned to the causes of it. The usual suspects were all offered—alcohol, poverty, lack of employment, etc. And it is true. People here live under wrenching circumstances in crowded, unsafe homes without electricity or running water in communities with open sewers and all the disease and problems that come with it, all on under one US dollar per day. The facilitator listened and then introduced a new idea: perhaps the cause of domestic violence is something a bit deeper. Perhaps, the facilitator suggested, the cause is male privilege/entitlement, the low status and value that society gives to women, how girls grow up thinking they are less than boys because they are often given less love, less education, less food and less share in the family resources. That perhaps the end result of this disparity between boys and girls actually legitimizes the common belief that men are better, are worth more, and by extension, this normalizes the abuse and violence that men inflict on women. Perhaps, he suggested, this inequality that starts at birth is what causes men's violence.

The room went quiet and a bit tense. Then a slow and genuinely authentic dawning comes

over people. They ask questions. They tell stories about their daughters, about their own family structures that keep women subordinate and create distance between them and their wives. They even describe situations where they are violent, and actually make the connection. They recognize that it is in fact deeper issues about belief systems, not the alcohol that makes them able to commit and then rationalize their violence. The conversation is revealing, private, at times halting. Clearly this is totally new territory—scary, weighty territory. Then these men—the tough, masculine stalwarts in the community, did something that, to me, was the most unexpected. They asked if next time they could bring their wives. I think they are joking at first. My mind automatically rebels and is suspicious. Even the facilitator is surprised and asks the man who first made the suggestion to explain further. He urges that it is so important that they get this information, that they want their wives to hear it in the same way. He struggles to articulate his reasoning, yet it is like when one gets a new idea and it cries out to be burst onto the world. The admission of this suggestion and the facilitator's invitation to the wives changes the air in the room: there is excitement, opportunity, and desire. There is real potential. They are radical. They are not extraordinary men and, surprisingly, their reaction is becoming more common. What these and other men, community volunteers, police, health care workers, social service providers and even religious leaders (both Christian and Muslim) are doing is a radical act. They are joining hands with women, looking inward, having difficult and challenging discussions, and then actually doing something to make their families safer, not as a kindness to women but because it is their right. They are, in essence, bringing the radical into the mainstream.

This process of politicization is not quick and sexy. It is slow and at times frustratingly collective. But one must respect this process and marvel at it, in the courage it takes to be open to a new idea, especially one that demands such a profound readjustment of habits and what we hold in our hearts. It is hard, sometimes intangible, and difficult to sell to donors. But the truly dangerous, frightening, and radical ideas usually are.