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*Diversity4Change* presents:

## **Conversations on Inclusion**

### **Creating Welcoming and Diverse Social Justice Movements**

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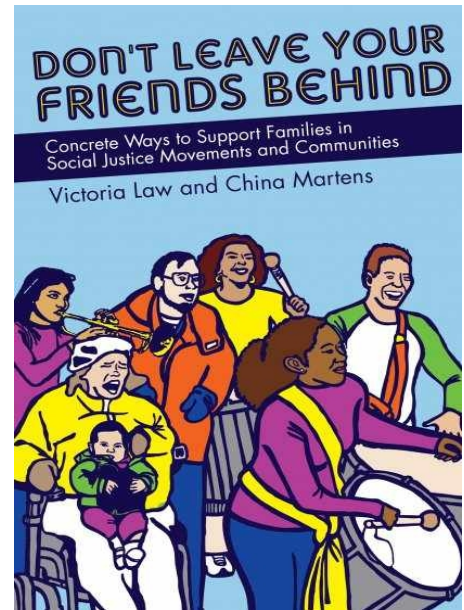
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## Let's create a culture in which it's okay to ask for help

### Mother, Author and Activist Vikki Law on the Inclusion of Kids and Families on Social Justice Movements

Vikki Law is the co-editor of “Don't Leave Your Friends Behind” and author of “Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women”.

**Diversity4Change:** Vikki Law, together with China Martens, you published *Don't Leave Your Friends Behind: Concrete Ways to Support Families in Social Justice Movements and Communities*. Why? What's the story behind that?



**Vikki Law:** Well, the origins of DLYFB go back to 2003 when China & I first met & did a workshop at the Baltimore Anarchist bookfair on how to build a radical parents' support network. There were a handful of parents who came with their young children. We realized that the kids weren't going to sit still inside a classroom (the bookfair was at John Hopkins University), so we moved our discussion to outside where we then had to chase the kids! One mom volunteered to deal with the kids, but then that meant she couldn't participate and all of the parents were tired, overstretched, didn't feel as if they had enough support to stay politically involved and definitely didn't have the energy to do the tremendous amount of work it would take to organize resources like childcare swaps that would, in the long run, help them (but in the short run is just one more thing to do). China noticed that lots of people without kids were walking by, sometimes smiling at the kids, and they looked like they had a lot of energy and that's when we realized that we needed to talk to people WITHOUT kids.

That night, China & I drafted an open letter to the anarchist community talking about how we needed support & gave it out at the bookfair the next day. Some people refused to take it, saying, "I don't have kids, so this doesn't pertain to me." So fast forward to 2006, when China's 1st book "The Future Generation" was published & she began doing events around her book & we decided to do our workshop on HOW people can support families in their communities. We were invited to do the workshop at Boston's anarcha-feminist conference La Rivolta! and we did a workshop on supporting moms & kids & why it's important for people who identify as anarchist and/or feminists to do so.

So that was the start of DLYFB and we kept doing the workshop, learning more about different people's struggles and how different oppressions intersect with caregiving. Even between the two of us - China being a white single mom who raised her daughter while on welfare and then while working-poor and me being a Chinese-American daughter of immigrants raising a biracial child - we experience parenting & community support differently (or lack of

community support too). At some point, we said that we were going to make the "zine of all zines".

**Diversity4Change:** What was your relationship to social activism at that point?

**Vikki Law:** I came out of the NYC anarchist/squatter scene. I'd been hugely active before becoming a mom - I'd been integrally involved with community arts collective ABC No Rio - setting up its darkroom, co-coordinating political art exhibitions, facilitating events; I had helped form Books Through Bars - NYC, which sends free books to people in prison. I had been involved with anarchist bookstore Blackout Books and, when that closed, was one of the founding collective members of a short-lived infoshop that inherited its stock (I had to leave the infoshop because the other members weren't willing or able to address the particular challenges I had being an active participant with an active toddler who would run around all over the place, which was dirty and not very safe).

I had also been doing a lot of legal support for people when they got arrested at protests or actions. I'm not a lawyer, but I would do the middle-of-the-night phone calls to sympathetic lawyers trying to secure pro-bono legal assistance and late-night showing up at court for arraignments, collecting bail money from different people, etc.

There are other things I was involved with as well that I'm probably not remembering... many of which I had to stop doing because of both the demands of having a baby and also because the communities/movements/groups that I'd been working with didn't know or didn't want to know how to support me in staying involved.

**Diversity4Change:** I want to go into your experiences as a parent and an activist, but first let me stay with the political movements your book talks about. It's a collection of activist's narratives on their communities, how they exclude families, and concrete ways to change it. What movements are covered?

**Vikki Law:** There are writers who have been involved (and still are involved, in some cases) in many different movements: there are mamis of color who are involved in anti-gentrification work and some involved in anti-prison and prisoner support work some who have gotten pushed out of radical lesbian & trans organizing when they made the decision to become parents, some from the punk scene and some who work on issues around (im)migration and several from people who have been involved in childcare collectives - collectives of people who see providing childcare so that parents can participate in organizing as a form of political activism.

**Diversity4Change:** So, what does exclusion - leaving your friends with kids behind – look like in political communities?

**Vikki Law:** It can look many different ways. It can be scheduling meetings at times that people who are parents & caregivers can't make - like late or late(r) at night that will run way into the evening or having meetings in spaces that aren't safe/friendly for kids (like a bar or a dirty punk house). Many times, a parent of a mobile child comes & is busy chasing the kid around for nearly the entire meeting and no one else helps which makes going to meetings not very

productive for the parent and so they begin to feel excluded or if their kid makes noise and people either say something about the noise or give the parent glares or stares, it feels like an uncomfortable space and so they stop coming. Many times, parents (especially of small kids) are told to find their own solutions to these problems - hire a babysitter or find someone (on their own) to watch the kid while they come to these meetings.

**Diversity4Change:** How do you feel about personal vs. collective solutions to childcare?

**Vikki Law:** I think that, if the collective expects the parent to find their own solution, they're reinforcing the dominant capitalist stereotype of "go solve your own problems". For all our rhetoric of a more socially just world/mutual aid/community/etc, we're not willing to look past our own comforts to see how we can put our politics into practice. Sadly, we've both experienced this personally & heard stories from other people who have had similar experiences.

**Diversity4Change:** Would you like to give an example of such an experience?

**Vikki Law:** I'll use myself as an example. As I said earlier, I'd been part of an anarchist bookstore called Blackout Books in the 1990s until it closed in 2000. I had some experience with running the store &, because I'd also been the treasurer at community arts space ABC No Rio and the money holder/responsible person for Books Through Bars, had some experience with keeping track of money/budgets/etc. When the new infoshop started, I'd just had my baby & didn't think I was up for being part of a time-consuming start-up. But one of the members came over, brought a book (and maybe some clothes) and really really really wanted me to be part of it, so I agreed. And, while my baby was not mobile & able to stay in the stroller, I could do it. But once she became mobile, it was hard for me to stay involved. Especially since info shop was in the lobby of a larger space where there was no way to cordon off the area, so i literally would have to chase her across a gigantic lobby. [And] where the owner of the space also had a dog that bit people, so it definitely wasn't a safe place for a toddler to be running around.

**Diversity4Change:** It seems to me that while the general culture of many activist spaces isn't child friendly, it's few individuals who do reach out. So then, what are the concrete ways to support and include families and transform our communities? How do we create community where activists aren't pushed out once they become parents?

**Vikki Law:** Be open to making changes that can accommodate their needs. So if you value a person's participation and experience & insight, don't say, "Well, this is your problem. YOU find a solution".

For some parents, they've found that having meetings at their house works much better than having them in space where their kids may be bored or the space may be physically unsafe. BUT the other people in the group need to help set up/clean up and not put it on the parent to do that. If the meeting is going to be long and/or the kid(s) is/are at an age where they won't sit through meetings or don't have the ability to sit through meetings (for example, if they have autism), see if you can provide childcare - people from the group can rotate out & hang

with the kid(s). They can ask someone(s) they know if they'd like to support the social justice work they're doing by hanging out & doing fun things with the kids. Some people may be very supportive of your cause, but don't want to sit through countless meetings & sessions.

**Diversity4Change:** We've talked to a mom who was part of a feminist self defense group that specifically asked for men to support their group by doing childcare.

**Vikki Law:** Yes! We have one or two pieces in the book by men who have done childcare as solidarity.

**Diversity4Change:** So in 5 or 10 years, what steps would you like to see activist communities taking for more inclusion?

**Vikki Law:** I'd like to see EVERYONE understand that parents' & caregivers' issues are a concern for EVERYONE to address, not just the people immediately impacted (after all--those of us doing organizing & social justice work aren't saying, "Well, we're not 17-year-old Black kids, so we're not going to care about the shooting of Trayvon Martin"). I'd like to see EVERYONE taking on these issues as something they do as part of their work. Any person doing caregiving should feel supported.

Whether it's people in the group stepping up to do childcare or people asking others to do it as an act of solidarity or people passing the hat to pay for childcare (which is what the Books Through Bars group did for me when my daughter was too old to want to even **contemplate** sitting through a meeting that would last several hours. I was able to pay for her & a friend (adult--of mine) to see the latest Harry Potter movie and I could be part of the decision making process. I knew she was not only safe, but also entertained). Communities & movements should also be making efforts to include young people--

whether it's childcare or child spaces at events, or, optimally, ways that youth can plug in. China can talk more about the work she's done with Kidz City, where they work with conference organizers to design kids programs. The first Kidz City, they had people from the adult conference contribute pages for a coloring book. They also had workshops, including one on Harriet Tubman & another on gender non-conformity. And, EVERYONE should be open to answering questions for youth - because, if we're not willing to explain our politics & our positions, then how are we reaching past our own limited circles? I've seen people not wanting to answer questions from my daughter or other kids simply because they were children.

And then also, recognizing that not all people face the same struggles - and recognizing that we're not in a contest to see who's most oppressed: So, while I'm a mom of color & have experienced racism from people who call themselves allies & from people who are probably just unapologetic racists, I'm not going to try to say that I have it worse than a White mom whose kid is severely developmentally disabled and, ideally, she would not try to compare her situation to mine in a way that ranks oppression

but instead, we can see how we can support each other and present a united stand to say, "Look supposed-community-for-social-justice. What are you going to do to support our needs?". And for our community/ies to be willing to learn from their mistakes and not shy away from speaking out -

so if someone says something racist, white people don't automatically wait for me or another person of color to step up & say something but explain why what was just said was racist & wrong. Because, whether you're a child or adult, that kind of thing affects you.

A little off the topic of DLYFB, earlier today, I was listening to an interview with Chinese-American graphic novelist Gene Luen Yang who talked about using Chinese mythology in his latest books. He talked about growing up listening to all sorts of Chinese mythology but how, when he got to school, none of his peers were all that interested in the folk tale heroes that are (or at least were - back when I was a kid & he was a kid) part of Chinese upbringing, even in the U.S. With no one else to be enthusiastic - or even care about - these heroes & stories that he was so excited about, he eventually turned to the mainstream superhero comics - Superman, etc. So what I take away from that to tie with DLYFB is to also think about what kind(s) of racial messages we send to the youth in our community. Are all of our heroes & sheroes white? What about the stories that we tell and the events that we celebrate? Can we be pro-active in learning more about other cultures and passing that on to the people in our lives (whether adults or kids) so that, five or ten years from now, no kid of color feels that they have to be quiet about their culture's folklore because no one else gets it?

Also, if people are doing things that might interest a kid, invite the kid along! For example, I live in NYC & see biking as super nerve-wracking. When my daughter was 2, a friend got a bike seat & began taking her on the monthly Critical Mass bike rides which my daughter LOVED LOVED LOVED. When my daughter outgrew the bike seat (as kids do) and it was time to get a new one, she split the cost of a new bike seat with me so it wasn't totally on me to buy a new one to enable my daughter to participate. If someone is into gardening or composting, they could invite a kid in their community to come along & help. And it can just be being willing to be a (reliable) adult in that person's life - especially when a young person enters their tween/teen years: a young woman whom I've known since she was eleven recently told me that, when she was a tween and then a teen, it really helped for her to have reliable (non-parental) adults that she could turn to when she realized that she didn't have all the answers about sex and relationships.

**Diversity4Change:** I love those ideas to make childcare political, too. If it's an anti-racist meeting, why not watch a movie, read a book, or make an art project that covers antiracist/anti-colonial stories during childcare?

**Vikki Law:** Exactly! Finally, let's create a culture in which it's okay to ask for help. Often, parents & caregivers face so much backlash when they ask for help that they give up and either try to do it all on their own at the risk of burning out or drop out.

**Diversity4Change:** Here's my final question: I've heard several activists say that kids are an unnecessary and annoying distraction from "the important work" - What would you say to them? Why is including kids and families so important - practically, but also as a political value?

**Vikki Law:** I'd question what they mean by "important work." Important to whom? And for whom are they doing this work? I find that argument a straw man argument. As one of the contributors to DLYFB has said, "Which of us has not been at a meeting or event in which an adult has not been an annoying distraction?". Practically speaking - if you don't take the steps to create a movement in which all ages can participate and feel welcomed, then you're creating a movement for only a handful of people. And that's not a movement - that's a social club. So if someone has been organizing or involved politically for x number of years & becomes a parent, you're saying that you don't value their experience or expertise and are willing to throw that all away (and probably have to reinvent the wheel, complete with lots of time-wasting mistakes) simply because you can't get past your own comfort zone to accommodate someone who may need support?

Politically, if you're building a movement, why would you exclude people? (Well, maybe if you're building a movement around being racist, you'd exclude people of color. Is that really the comparison you want people to make with your group?). Why would you exclude people based on age or the size of their household/family? What kind of movement are you trying to create? It's not an inclusive movement, let alone one that really is working towards social justice, if you're willing to dismiss or exclude or push out people based on age (or race or gender identity, etc). Is the movement you're trying to create simply you and people who look & live like you?

I was in Montreal this past year to do a DLYFB workshop (with China!) at its anarchist bookfair: They have a very large kids' program that has been going on for a number of years, many of those years organized by people who are not parents or caregivers. Also, Montreal is a city in which new mothers can choose between taking 10 months fully paid maternity leave or 12 months of maternity leave with nearly 75% pay. Childcare is highly subsidized so that most parents only pay ten dollars per month.

**Diversity4Change:** Wow!

**Vikki Law:** So, in the 5-10 year plan, why wouldn't we want to try to attain something like that for people in OUR communities? Or, to bring it back to the U.S., let's look at the political movements of the not-too-distant past like the Young Lords - who took over a portion of the hospital & set up a politicized child care for the kids of hospital workers & patients - or the Black Panther Party, who did their free breakfast programs for kids (which the U.S. government now does but didn't before the Panthers started it) and free afterschool & summer camps. They didn't see kids as "unnecessary & annoying distractions." They saw them as integral parts of the movements they were building for liberation. So are we working towards justice & liberation? Or a just-us model?



# Feminism's issues with trans women don't just hurt trans women, they hurt the entire movement



## Writer and Performance Artist Amy Roberts on the Exclusion of Trans Women in Feminist Spaces

Amy Roberts is a trans female writer, spoken-word performer, computer geek and author of "Bite: Bittersweet Portions from a Trans Female Troublemaker!". She lives and performs in the Bay Area, California. Check out her work at [www.amydentata.com](http://www.amydentata.com). You can also find many of her

publications on facebook and youtube.

**Diversity4Change:** Hi, Amy! Tell us about yourself. Who are you, what do you do?

**Amy Roberts:** My name is Amy Roberts, known to most as Amy Dentata through my online presence and spoken word performances. I'm a writer, performer, and videogame designer. Most of my work focuses on my experience as an abuse survivor, taking that knowledge and applying it to other areas.

For example, my Flash game Rock Bottom isn't explicitly about being a survivor, but is infused with themes from that perspective. A lot of my comedic performances are about pretty serious things, too. Whether its writing, comedy, games, or whatever, there tends to be that weird mix between humor and pain.

**Diversity4Change:** What's your relationship with feminist spaces or political communities?

**Amy Roberts:** I consider myself a feminist and have been active in online discussions about feminism. I'm not too involved with academics, but have had a lot of interaction on the community side. I have been a part of sex-positive events and worked with queer and feminist porn producers as well.

**Diversity4Change:** Some of your work as a writer is about being trans\* in a transphobic world. What does exclusion of trans\* identified people look like in political communities?

**Amy Roberts:** Within many feminist spaces, there is a continuing problem with exclusion of trans women. To some degree it's sincere ignorance on the part of cis people involved, but there is also a long-running problem of feminist goals being stated in cissexist ways that attack trans women as well. For example, in many spaces trans women aren't allowed because we are presumed to have penises, and penises have falsely been built up as a symbol of patriarchy. We're seen as "men invading women's spaces" when we are simply women who, unsurprisingly,

need the support of other women. This leads to trans women being rejected not just from political groups but also from crucial resources like rape crisis shelters (despite the fact that trans women are even more likely to be targets of sexual violence than cis women). Zinnia Jones recently wrote about a women's shelter in Maine that rejected a trans woman because she often dresses in a t-shirt and jeans, and doesn't always wear makeup. Not only was she held to a ridiculous standard that cis women don't meet, it was also a standard steeped in sexist beliefs about women! That is not at all an isolated case. When it comes to critical resources like this, rejection is the norm for trans women.

We are separated not just from emergency resources, but community and friendship. This means we're also forcibly kept out of important circles that would give greater economic stability. It's worth saying, this isn't just a problem for trans women in general. It's also a problem for other marginalized groups and, most damagingly, the places where they intersect. The common refrain now is that these problems hit trans women of color most severely, and there's no denying it.

Exclusion also affects trans men to some small degree, but what I've experienced mostly is that trans men are able to gain prestige within the feminist community, and then keep all their professional and community ties post-transition. It creates an imbalance that goes against the goals of feminism.

***Diversity4Change:*** What changes do you want to see – in people individually, as well as collectively as communities?

***Amy Roberts:*** I would like for feminism, academia, and the scattered resources that aren't directly tied to these institutions but share their goals, to understand a very basic fact: Trans women are women. We aren't infiltrators. We aren't a special case that should be tolerated just to keep up a good public image. We are women, and our issues are women's issues. When feminists keep trans women at arms length, they hurt women. When academia and other women-focused professional networks reject trans women, they hurt women. Our goals are not at odds, nor are they even merely benign. They are tightly wound together. Reproductive rights are not just about abortion, they are about bodily autonomy; it doesn't make sense to support bodily autonomy in the case of abortion but not others. Trans women aren't the only ones who wrestle with hormones during their lives. Trans women aren't the only ones affected negatively by research that only examines cisgender men as a population. Though it's somewhat an oversimplification to say so, in a very broad sense the objectification, fetishization, and sexual violence aimed at trans women is yet another manifestation of misogyny. The hazing that happens in toxic male culture—which overwhelmingly targets trans women as objects of ridicule as it reinforces harmful behavior in men—is an issue for both trans and cis women. Feminism's issues with trans women don't just hurt trans women, they hurt the entire movement.

***Diversity4Change:*** What would a political space, one where you would feel safe and welcome, look like? Think of an organizing space like at a meeting, or an action like a march.

***Amy Roberts:*** It's hard to define a "safe space", because at some point you have to ask, "Safe for whom?" What's safe to one person may not be safe to the next. This is true even for those

who completely fit the target audience for a space. For me, safety isn't just defined by what checkboxes the moderators have ticked off, but how the people in the space interact with people. How do they handle conflict? How open are they with communication? How likely are they to shield people from accountability because those people have social capital? How willing are they to change and adapt their guidelines? I can look for signs of a good space based on how well they define ground rules, how much they foster open communication, and how diverse their composition is. Not just now, but years from now. Do they maintain people long-term, or is there a revolving door of lesser-represented people who show up bright-eyed and then get microaggressed out of the place? Is the place all-white? That's never a good sign. Are they all wealthy? Also questionable. Is the space accessible, not just to the disabled, but to people with low incomes? There's no easy way to determine the safety of a space, as any group will end up with abusive people in it. What I'm interested in is how well the space deals with these issues, not whether they exist or not.

**Diversity4Change:** I'm interested in the connection between fighting transphobia in a space and, let's say, classism. Could you elaborate? Or any other discrimination, really.

**Amy Roberts:** There's no avoiding class when dealing with transphobia, and because race is so intimately connected with class, race cannot be ignored either. I'm white myself and so can't speak to the latter with any authority, but as for the former: To a large degree, fighting transphobia is also about overcoming class divisions. Class doesn't just divide cis and trans people, it also divides the trans community itself and harms our ability to organize. Wealthy trans women often keep to themselves because they want to live "normal" lives and not rock the boat that gave them stability. Well-off trans men are often invested in academic institutions that are hostile to trans women, or are too invested in male culture to reach out to trans women. Outside of the trans community, many feminist spaces leave out lower-class people (including trans people, who are disproportionately unemployed and poor) just by virtue of the way they are organized. High entry fees, a requirement for social connections within higher-class circles, and other kinds of barriers arise not due to malice, but due to the way class insulates people from those who aren't as well off. The thing here isn't that class differences are by definition sharply divided between trans and cis people, but that trans status can further aggravate the divide and cause a feedback loop. Without a focus on community that isn't oriented around capital and careerism, that divide will remain in place. And mainstream feminism is currently very focused on capital and careerism.

**Diversity4Change:** Earlier you said that feminism's issues with trans women hurts the entire movement. How? Why is inclusiveness and diversity important? If someone were to say "it's just easier organizing with people who are all the same" - what would you respond?

**Amy Roberts:** Mainstream feminism is steeped in assumptions about sex and gender that dull its intellectual edge. I mentioned before how feminists often misconstrue the penis as a symbol of patriarchy. That false symbolism is one of many ways that feminists can miss the mark, absent a deeper examination of gender. In this example, if one believes penises themselves are somehow a driving force behind misogyny, one then naturalizes patriarchal metaphors of violence that are used to hurt women. It's a re-creation of gender essentialism under the

banner of feminism. Trans women are coming into this discussion and saying, "Hey, no. That's not how it works." Some of us are ok with the anatomy we're born with, and we don't like them being construed into instruments of violence.

Through merely existing, trans women in particular challenge the idea that manhood is superior and desirable. We are pushed into this group that has massive social privilege, and we say, "No. That's not me." This shows that gender isn't just about the social hierarchy. While essentialism gets just about everything wrong about gender, there is still some tiny part that is, in fact, innate in people. This changes not just academic models of gender, it gives us insight into how to deal with men who can't let go of patriarchal norms. They defend themselves not just because of relative power, but because they often don't have a viable alternative that still allows them to keep their sense of self intact. The key then isn't to simply attack men, but to encourage them to redefine their own genders. Absent a deeper understanding of how gender is, in some small way, tied to our sense of selves, that kind of dialog can't take place. This has also led to some groups defining female empowerment in terms of rejecting femininity as being a pure construct of men used to oppress women. As Julia Serano has outlined in her book *Whipping Girl*, what often happens here is that feminist groups self-select based on the kinds of identities their politics allow for. So the group that says femininity is a patriarchal construct is, naturally, formed by people who don't themselves get anything out of femininity. Others who do enjoy femininity get left out and form their own splinter group. It is trans people that break up these ideological divisions, because many trans women have to fight to be allowed access to femininity. We have the insight to see that yes, a lot of things about femininity are framed in oppressive ways that hurt women, but that doesn't mean all of femininity itself is one big deceit.

There's countless other ways that trans people bring something new to the conversation. And all that aside, we're also simply people who **exist**, and have value as human beings beyond advancing academic critique.

**Diversity4Change:** I think that people often try to be conscious of gender as a social construct and refer to "female-bodied" or "male-bodied" people, when it would be more useful to speak of how someone identifies. Here's a quote from your book, "Bite!": "I'm a woman. This is my body. This is a woman's body." Asking you as a writer, what role does language play in terms of inclusivity?

**Amy Roberts:** If it's the part I'm thinking of, it may have been "I am a woman, therefore this is what a woman looks like." Though I don't remember everything off-hand. But yes, definitely, trans women's bodies are women's bodies. My body isn't a "man's body". At no point has a man owned it. It's always been mine. If anything, the concept of "being trapped in a man's body" speaks to how much people are used to women's bodies being dictated by someone other than the woman inhabiting it!

But getting back to language, I'd say language gets very messy, especially within the trans community. The trans community has insight into gender that breaks apart established language for describing one's gender and one's body. Since we have started within a culture that doesn't even acknowledge we exist, we have had to make up our own language as we go along, in order to describe our experiences. Because of that, the language that's in vogue in the trans community is constantly in flux. I use different terminology now than I would have even

a couple years ago.

This, on one hand, is an amazing event to be a part of. We're seeing what is basically an exponential jump in awareness about our experiences within the community. It's like a mini-singularity. At the same time, it also makes things extremely confusing and disjointed. People outside the community can't keep up, because they aren't privy to the discussions we have about gender, and since they don't have any investment in thinking about gender the way we do, they aren't having these conversations on their own.

At the same time, geographic divides and the very nature of lingual shifts means that different conventions pop up in different parts of the world. Sometimes these conventions clash. Because of that, I don't think we'll ever have a solid, surefire lexicon that is guaranteed to be wholly inclusive. The language will never be perfect or universal. One common debate within the trans community is about a single space. Do you say "transwoman" or "trans woman?" Transperson or trans person? In the end, it's a question of convention. But a lot of people get hurt by this debate, and it's not something that should be dismissed. We're constantly fighting for acceptance, so even the tiniest perceived blows can be very painful. I think we'd be best served by acknowledging that language is a dynamic, organic process that will never become static. At the same time, that doesn't mean we should blow off any offense as an overreaction, nor should we pretend as if slurs aren't harmful when it comes to overall social trends.

So for anyone trying to be more trans-inclusive in their language, I'd say: Don't get discouraged when people get angry at you. Don't expect people to ever be 100% satisfied. But also listen hard to what people tell you, when they suggest ways to improve.

**Diversity4Change:** Okay, here's my last question: What makes a good ally? And what steps do you want to see political communities take in the next 5-10 years?

**Amy Roberts:** There's been a lot of talk about allies, and I think one important thing gets overlooked:

"Ally" is not an identity. It isn't a self-appointed label. Allyship is about building trust through action. I don't encourage anyone to call themselves an ally. I encourage them to act in ways that actually support the trans community. Even if they don't get recognition for it; allyship isn't about gaining social prestige either. If you do right by people who are marginalized, and not just say you are trustworthy, but prove it through action, then maybe the people in that group will consider you an ally. But please, don't appoint yourself. Just do right. Being a good human being is its own reward. I would like to see political communities focus less on PR and more on the ways they behave. I'd like to see them not bring up their resumes when they screw up. (As in, "I've done x amount of community service for you people, how dare you criticize me!" Which is a tactic many people go for when their behavior is recognized as harmful.) I'd like to see the mainstream GLBT and feminist movements stop their current tracks toward assimilation and individual careerism, and focus on actual community again. I'd like people to stop making token references to the trans community as a way to get good public image, and actually listen to us. I'd like for them to amplify our voices instead of drowning us out with their own.

## Growth Happens on the Margins

Meet Sandy Hope, Who Went Viral About Challenging Transphobia in Lesbian and Feminist Communities



### A Feminist Challenging Transphobia

Personal tales inspired by the fight against transphobia in the lesbian and feminist communities

**Diversity4Change:** Sandy, you're the editor of the blog *A Feminist Challenging Transphobia*, where you tell *personal tales inspired by the fight against transphobia in lesbian and feminist communities*. Tell us about the lesbian and feminist spaces you've been involved in, and what made you start your blog and facebook page!

**Sandy Hope:** wow, big question! :-) Ok, so I've been a feminist forever, but I came into a lot of lesbian and separatist feminist spaces about a decade ago, after I came out as lesbian. I love those spaces, and feel tender towards them and committed to the good things they do. But at the same time, I very quickly realised there was some ugly transphobia in those spaces - not from the majority, but from a vocal minority. As someone who had trans\* friends and my own gender issues I just didn't understand that transphobia. I spent a very long time just listening, seeing if these people had a point, and the truth is they don't, so then I started speaking up against the prejudice and misunderstanding that led them to their conclusions. I found that somehow though they were the minority voice they drowned out other voices, and that's when I decided to try and help trans-supportive feminism have a higher profile. I started my blog because I realised the best way to reach people was by being vulnerable and open about my own experiences . . . The truth is, it wasn't until I really started sticking up for trans\* people that I realised I was a trans\* person!

**Diversity4Change:** Could you give us some examples of those transphobic experiences and the

personal tales you write about on your blog?

**Sandy Hope:** Sure . . . The first experience was having a transwoman friend who found she wasn't welcome at the lesbian group we met at . . . witnessing the devastation to her when she read the words "women born women only" in their mailings really shook me up. I'm pleased to say that group has changed it's policy now! The silly thing is the group were worried about "men in dresses" infiltrating their space, but what their policy really achieved was to marginalise a very shy, vulnerable and kind woman. She wasn't an activist, she didn't protest, she just became isolated. Later I was involved in organising an event, and there was a big fight over whether transwomen should be allowed in. Those opposed were in the minority, but they thought they spoke for everyone and somehow they dug in so hard they got their way.

**Diversity4Change:** Wow, it seems like that's a really blatant and open exclusion of trans\* identified people. What about more subtle attitudes? Or have you experienced communities that were - generally - open minded, but were still exclusionary in practical ways?

**Sandy Hope:** Yes I think whenever I've been in mixed trans/cis company, even accepting company, there is a kind of "othering" of trans\* folk, particularly a tendency for the LGB community to see trans\* folk as not quite part of the jigsaw. So when my partner and I came out as trans\* in the same year, there was a sense that we'd gone over to another group, rather than that we were still part of the same group but with an added dimension we were exploring. I believe gender and sexuality intersect in very complex ways, and that a lot of prejudice towards LGB people has more to do with gender non-conformity than sexual orientation. I don't think you can really separate LGB from T in an easy way.

While I was angry and outraged at the way transwomen were treated I sort of pushed aside my own gender issues, I think those attitudes close down a whole conversation about gender within LGB communities

**Diversity4Change:** From your experience, is the exclusion of trans\* identified people a second-wave feminist issue? Or a generational one? Or is it present within all age and feminist groups?

**Sandy Hope:** I think it was institutionalised by second wave feminism but it's not that simple . . . I know some awesome, seventy-something radical feminists who absolutely get trans\* issues and there are still youngsters getting sucked into the hate. Just like homophobes, I suspect many transphobes are struggling to make sense of their own gender struggles. But at the same time if you exclude trans\* people and don't let them into the conversation, how can people learn? And there's a big difference between changing a policy and actively making sure trans\* people feel safe to come into a space - we're a long way off that, because not enough cis people challenge transphobia and cissexism.

**Diversity4Change:** In your opinion, what makes political organizing spaces, events or protests safe and welcoming for the trans\* community?

**Sandy Hope:** [That's a] difficult question because language intended to be inclusive can also

be off-putting - some trans\* women want to be mentioned explicitly so they're sure they're invited, others understandably feel hurt if they're split off from the rest of the group "women" - trans\* men face much gender oppression and deserve feminist protection, but also want to be recognised as men. Then there's genderqueer folk like myself who sit staring at bathroom doors thinking "which one?" - I struggle with a space that's women-only because it feels like I can only take a part of myself in. I'm not sure I know the answer to how we can organise differently, I suspect we need a real evolution of how we think about spaces, intersectionality and inclusion. I suspect the best way for cis folk to learn is not to invite trans\* folk into "their" space, because that reeks of privilege, but to visit trans\* space and actively engage, when welcome, with the trans\* community, support trans\* led groups and events, hear trans\* voices and ask trans\* folk what their (various and not always aligning) needs might be (my own personal need is for a less gender binaried world!).

**Diversity4Change:** You brought up the bathroom "dilemma". If you were to organize an event, what would be your ideal set up in terms of bathrooms?

**Sandy Hope:** I wish we could do away with gender/sex segregated bathrooms altogether, but I realise the world isn't probably ready for that - but I hope we get to a place where gender neutral facilities are the norm not the exception, and if I hear one more made-up story about cis women being unsafe with transwomen using the facilities, I might lose my British reserve . . . it's an utterly false argument for so many reasons, but it keeps getting dragged up by people who should know better. The people who are in danger using bathrooms are trans\* people.

**Diversity4Change:** Could you elaborate? Why are bathrooms unsafe for trans\* folks?

**Sandy Hope:** Transwomen (and cis butch lesbians) that don't "pass" as female often experience aggression from women using women's bathrooms, whilst being in severe danger of violence if using male facilities. Equally true for trans\* men - it's a scary choice - do I risk getting complained about, shouted at, maybe accused of being a pervert, or do I risk getting beaten up? I have friends who've developed urinary problems from simply not daring to go while they're out and about.

**Diversity4Change:** That's horrific.

**Sandy Hope:** uh-huh . . . and this week there was a story in the US about a young trans woman sexually harassing girls in the bathroom . . . it's all over the news. The thing is, the story was made up, the kid never harassed anyone. There's a phone call to the school that can be listened to online that verifies this - didn't stop Fox from running with the harassment story though

**Diversity4Change:** Media spreading negative stereotypes is a huge issue. But let's talk about pronouns. Do you think they're talked about enough? Are they generally respected and used correctly or is that still an issue even in feminist and queer spaces? You've told me you go by "they/them/their" pronouns - do you have any advice for how to handle people who are disrespectful in using correct names and pronouns?



**Sandy Hope:** do it back to them ;-). I don't know, the truth is a young friend of ours went to gender neutral pronouns a while back and I struggled myself, so you gotta give people time to learn, and not be too, you know "if you don't get my pronouns right you're an asshole". I'm trying to be patient with people - it's a new idea. Honestly, I don't fully understand why radical feminists who want to abolish gender haven't gone gender neutral themselves, and I think going gender neutral could be an enormous act of revolution. Having said that, I didn't do it myself to be revolutionary but to be authentic, and I genuinely believe that however gender neutral we become in our language gender variance will still manifest in all sorts of fascinating ways. But experimenting with gender neutrality so we shut down the artificial, binary stuff, that could be really cool . . . The community needs to work on being more creative and flexible with pronouns.

**Diversity4Change:** You said earlier more cis people should be challenging transphobia. How do you feel about the term "Ally"? What makes a good Ally?

**Sandy Hope:** Aha, I thought I was an ally then I turned out to be trans\* myself, so the first thing is never assume that the "ally" is an outsider and doesn't have a right to involve themselves in the conversation. I think communities of all descriptions can be hard on allies, and there's plenty out there about allies needing to listen, to be aware of their privilege, but there's nothing so vulnerable as a person in the closet struggling with their own issues and trying their best - so I think we could try and be kind to allies. Plus, it does take courage to speak up - I paid hefty prices as a trans\* ally challenging transphobia in spaces where there were no out trans\* folk and it pretty much fell to "cis" people like myself. I don't want cookies, but I do want to acknowledge that every time someone says "that's not funny" to a gay joke, or corrects someone's use of your pronouns behind your back, they are being a little bit brave and that's more than a lot of people will do. I worry that some of the anti-ally rhetoric divides us all when we could be uniting . . .

**Diversity4Change:** What do you mean by anti-ally rhetoric?

**Sandy Hope:** Just lately I'm hearing a lot of negativity about allies and I've seen some out-and-out attacks on some allies of different groups of people. I get a little bit tired of the "doing it for cookies" idea, because I honestly think almost all allies get more grief than cookies. Yes, they can get it wrong and be, as we all are, unaware of their own privilege sometimes, but there's enough prejudice in the world it feels a shame to bash folks whose hearts are in the right place (but absolutely when they get it wrong, we should call them out for it).

**Diversity4Change:** Here's our final question – I want to talk about where “the movement” should be going in the long haul. In 5 or 10 years, what transformation do you want to see in lesbian and feminist spaces and communities?

**Sandy Hope:** I think if we can get trans\* folk engaged in feminism and feminists fully engaged with the trans\* community we could blow gender and gender oppression wide open and do some really radical stuff. Growth happens on the margins, that's what permaculture says and

it's true here . . . there's exciting stuff happening in the places where radical feminism intersects (healthily) with the trans\* community, and trans\* radical feminists are some of the most mind-expanding people to be around. Their ideas weren't radical 40 years ago, they're radical now, and hopefully they'll shake us all up. We may find we have to relinquish the sex binary and stop categorising human beings according to parts . . . we may learn to accept there is a multiverse of difference between all people rather than simple, fixed dichotomies. I feel really excited by what I've learned from the trans\* feminist community and I hope other cis folks stop and listen.

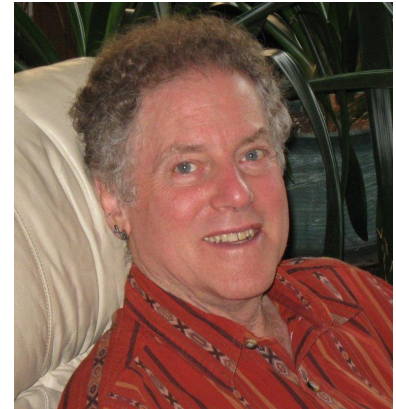
**For more information, visit:**

**[www.feministchallengingtransphobia.wordpress.com](http://www.feministchallengingtransphobia.wordpress.com) and *Lesbians and Feminist against Transphobia* on Facebook.**

## Being an ally is a practice, not an identity

### Paul Kivel on White Men's Roles in Fighting Racism and Sexism

As an activist and author of many books on social justice issues, Paul Kivel educates and speaks about racism and diversity, challenges of youth, sexual violence and the impact of class and power on daily life. For more information, visit: <http://www.paulkivel.com>



**Diversity4Change:** Paul, you've published numerous books on ending racist and sexist oppression in our society. What's unusual is that you're a white, male authors in the field. What's your background? Did you wake up one morning and think – I want to educate myself and others on how we can end white male supremacy?

**Paul Kivel:** I have been an activist since college in the late 1960s, involved in anti-Vietnam war projects and racial justice work. In the late 1970s we started a project called the Oakland Men's Project specifically to educate and mobilize men and boys around issues of male violence. So I've been grappling with the challenges of how people with privilege can stand with those under attacks as allies for a long time.

**Diversity4Change:** You wrote an entire book on Allyship: “Making Allies, Making Friends”- What's an ally? Why is it important to speak up even when you're not targeted?

**Paul Kivel:** Being an ally is a practice, not an identity. It's what you do everyday, living as a member of a human and biological community and working with others for healing, equity, sustainability and justice.

Being an ally stems from the simple yet profound understanding that we are all interdependent. We live on the same ship, to use a metaphor, and even though we are on different decks--some of us are up top in 1st class, others in 2nd, 3rd, etc. class and some in steerage, if the boat sinks we all go down together. I borrow the ship metaphor from my colleagues Victor Lewis and Hugh Vasquez. Even if we're in say 3rd class with others, some of us with male, white, or other forms of privilege might have upper bunks, or other advantages that others in our class don't share--still we're all in it together.

**Diversity4Change:** What do you mean by male or white privileges?

**Paul Kivel:** Privilege of any sort means that those in power, ruling elites make decisions that benefit your group, that exploit, violate, and attack those in another group, and in exchange for collaborating in this system you receive some benefits so as more safety, higher income, better jobs, more respect, etc.

Those who are in the benefitting group such as men or white people are within the culture of power. They are seen as normal, average, basically good and all others are suspect, dangerous, marginalized and demonized. Most of those with privilege, however, are still significantly exploited and manipulated.

**Diversity4Change:** You also wrote “Uprooting Racism - How White People can Work for Racial Justice”. So, what can they do?

**Paul Kivel:** If you are a member of a group with privilege, such as being white or male, you can direct your resources, education, experience, skills, money and energy towards working with others to resist oppression. You can do this at school, at work, in your family, or out in the community.

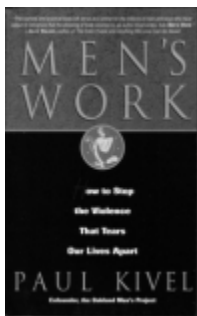
First you have to recognize that racism, etc. is pervasive and systematic. Then you have to understand how the entire system works and how it is interconnected with other systems of oppression such as sexism, capitalism, etc. Then, using a racial justice lens, understanding our interdependence, people can develop strategies for addressing particular ways that racism plays out in our communities.

**Diversity4Change:** Give us some examples of what fighting oppression looks like – personally, collectively, and on a societal, transformative level.

**Paul Kivel:** I think the most important level is the collective political and economic level but the others matter as well. Collectively they challenge current policies that exclude many from equitable social benefits such as education, housing, and health care. We challenge organizational policies that produce differential outcomes. We get together to produce alternative forms of social organizations that are inclusive and beneficial such as co-ops, collectives, and other decentralized and sustainable ways of organizing social activity. And we try to stop the militaristic, exploitive, and violent agendas of ruling elites. There are literally thousands of ways to get involved. People are already doing so much--you don't have to start something new. Look around and join with others who are already in motion.

On the personal level we can begin to change our daily practices, our consumption patterns, our behavior towards others, and the organizations we are a part of.

**Diversity4Change:** Our research project looks specifically at exclusion and discrimination in social justice movements. Do you have any advice for political organizers?



**Paul Kivel:** I think we have to assume that racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization are always at play in our organizations and we can't assume we have eliminated them. We should be neither complacent or naive. That means we constantly revisit and analyze how these issues may be inadvertently or subtly leading to the marginalization or disenfranchisement of groups such as women, people of color, people with disabilities, or immigrants.

We also need to support, develop, and promote the leadership of those from traditionally excluded groups. Those with privilege can examine how that

privilege plays out, step back, and support the leadership of others.

**Diversity4Change:** In “Men's Work” you advocate for men taking on an active role in challenging sexual violence. It's even read in “Ending Sexual Violence” college classes. Tell us about ways that men can make a difference and why it's not only up to women to fight sexism.

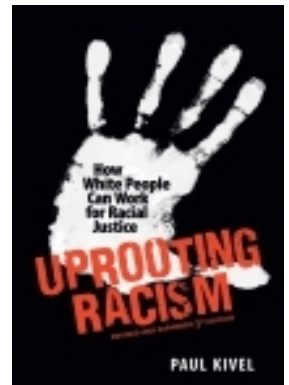
**Paul Kivel:** Sexism is terribly destructive to men as well as women. Men are given some small level of benefits in return for monitoring, policing and disciplining the women around them. We are socialized to be tough, aggressive, in control, and never ask for help. This leads to shorter lifespans, high rates of alcohol and other drug abuse, the inability to be intimate with others, and makes us vulnerable to economic exploitation and manipulation.

To counter that men can unlearn the male socialization we all receive, learn to value and respect women, and take steps to work with women, young people, and other men to challenge all the levels of sexism that we see around us. It's in our best interests, making us healthier, happier, more connected, and more spiritually whole.

We should remember that we grow the food, we produce the meals, and we serve the food but few of us actually sit at the table. Most of us are under the table waiting for scraps to fall off and then we fight each other over the scraps rather than strategizing how to change the seating arrangement at the table so that everyone has enough to eat.

**Diversity4Change:** The "Oakland Men's Project", which you co-founded, focused on how Men could do important work in ending sexual violence. But I'd like to jump back to "Uprooting Racism" and speak about anger. One of your chapters is titled: “Thank you for being angry”. What's that about?

**Paul Kivel:** Anger is a natural human response to injustice. We become angry when something is not right. Ruling elites would like us to think anger is dangerous because our anger at injustice really does threaten them. When people are angry they are often pointing out things that are not working for them and for others. We should appreciate that and thank them for noticing that things are not right. Otherwise we blame them for being angry and ignore the roots of the problem.



**Diversity4Change:** I'm going to play devil's advocate: isn't it easier and more comfortable to just surround yourself with people who are like you? Why is diversity and inclusion so important?

**Paul Kivel:** We now have abundant proof that the higher the level of inequality in a society the poorer the quality of life for everyone, even those who are wealthiest. We also have lots of evidence that when some part of the natural environment is degraded the entire ecosystem is weakened. We can pretend that inequality and violation only affect others but the reality is that sooner or later - and it is usually sooner - injustice leads to widespread destructiveness of our environment, our democratic ideals, and our spiritual integrity, as well as to our personal healthy and relationships.

***Diversity4Change:*** Where there is no justice, there is no peace?

***Paul Kivel:*** Yes. That's probably a good place to stop unless you have a final question?

***Diversity4Change:*** I do!

***Paul Kivel:*** I thought you might.

***Diversity4Change:*** We ask all our interviewees to tell us about their long term vision. Where should we be, as political movements, in 5-10 years?

***Paul Kivel:*** In power! building healthy sustainable, equitable and just organizations, institutions, and shifting the ecological balance towards true long term viability for all life and for our future generations.