

I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic.

There are better ways of doing social justice work.

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By Loretta Ross

Ms. Ross, an expert on women's issues, racism and human rights, is a founder of the reproductive justice theory.

Today's call-out culture is so seductive, I often have to resist the overwhelming temptation to clap back at people on social media who get on my nerves. Call-outs happen when people publicly shame each other online, at the office, in classrooms or anywhere humans have beef with one another. But I believe there are better ways of doing social justice work.

Recently, someone lied about me on social media and I decided not to reply. "Never wrestle with a pig," as George Bernard Shaw said. "You both get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it." And one of the best ways to make a point is to ignore someone begging for attention. Thanks, Michelle Obama, for this timely lesson; most people who read her book "Becoming" probably missed that she subtly threw shade this way.

Call-outs are often louder and more vicious on the internet, amplified by the "clicktivist" culture that provides anonymity for awful behavior. Even incidents that occur in real life, like Barbeque Becky or Permit Patty, can end up as an admonitory meme on social media. Social media offers new ways to be the same old humans by virally exposing what has always been in our hearts, good or bad.

My experiences with call-outs began in the 1970s as a young black feminist activist. I sharply criticized white women for not understanding women of color. I called them out while trying to explain intersectionality and white supremacy. I rarely questioned whether the way I addressed their white privilege was actually counterproductive. They barely understood what it meant to be *white* women in the system of white supremacy. Was it realistic to expect them to comprehend the experiences of black women?

Fifty years ago, black activists didn't have the internet, but rather gossip, stubbornness and youthful hubris. We believed we could change the world and that the most powerful people were afraid of us. Efforts like the F.B.I.'s COINTELPRO projects created a lot of discord. Often, the most effective activists were killed or imprisoned, but it nearly always started with discrediting them through a call-out attack.

I, too, have been called out, usually for a prejudice I had against someone, or for using insensitive language that didn't keep up with rapidly changing conventions. That's part of everyone's learning curve but I still felt hurt, embarrassed and defensive. Fortunately, patient elders helped me grow through my discomfort and appreciate that context, intentions and nuances matter. Colleagues helped me understand that I experienced things through my trauma. There was a difference between what I felt was true and what were facts. This ain't easy and it ain't over — even as an elder now myself.

But I wonder if contemporary social movements have absorbed the most useful lessons from the past about how to hold each other accountable while doing extremely difficult and risky social justice work. Can we avoid individualizing oppression and not use the movement as our personal therapy space? Thus, even as an incest and hate crime survivor, I have to recognize that not every flirtatious man is a potential rapist, nor every racially challenged white person is a Trump supporter.

We're a polarized country, divided by white supremacy, patriarchy, racism against immigrants and increasingly vitriolic ways to disrespect one another. Are we evolving or devolving in our ability to handle conflicts? Frankly, I expect people of all political persuasions to call me out — productively and unproductively — for my critique of this culture. It's not a partisan issue.

The heart of the matter is, there is a much more effective way to build social justice movements. They happen in person, in real life. Of course so many brilliant and effective social justice activists know this already. "People don't understand that organizing isn't going online and cussing people out or going to a protest and calling something out," Patrisse Khan-Cullors, a founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, wrote in "How We Fight White Supremacy,"

For example, when I worked to deprogram incarcerated rapists in the 1970s, I told the story of my own sexual assaults. It opened the floodgates for theirs. They were candid about having raped women, admitted having done it to men or revealed being raped themselves. As part of our work together, they formed Prisoners Against Rape, the country's first anti-sexual assault program led by men.

I believe #MeToo survivors can more effectively address sexual abuse without resorting to the punishment and exile that mirror the prison industrial complex. Nor should we use social media to rush to judgment in a courtroom composed of clicks. If we do, we run into the paradox Audre Lorde warned us about when she said that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

We can build restorative justice processes to hold the stories of the accusers and the accused, and work together to ascertain harm and achieve justice without seeing anyone as disposable people and violating their human rights or right to due process. And if feminists were able to listen to convicted rapists in the 1970s, we can seek innovative and restorative methods for accused people today. That also applies to people fighting white supremacy.

On a mountaintop in rural Tennessee in 1992, a group of women whose partners were in the Ku Klux Klan asked me to provide anti-racist training to help keep their children out of the group. All day they called me a "well-spoken colored girl" and inappropriately asked that I sing Negro spirituals. I naïvely thought at the time that all white people were way beyond those types of insulting anachronisms.

Instead of reacting, I responded. I couldn't let my hurt feelings sabotage my agenda. I listened to how they joined the white supremacist movement. I told them how I felt when I was 8 and my best friend called me "nigger;" the first time I had heard that word. The women and I made progress. I did not receive reports about further outbreaks of racist violence from that area for my remaining years monitoring hate groups.

These types of experiences cause me to wonder whether today's call-out culture unifies or splinters social justice work, because it's not advancing us, either with allies or opponents. Similarly problematic is the "cancel culture," where people attempt to expunge anyone with whom they do not perfectly agree, rather than remain focused on those who profit from discrimination and injustice.

Call-outs are justified to challenge provocateurs who deliberately hurt others, or for powerful people beyond our reach. Effectively criticizing such people is an important tactic for achieving justice. But most public shaming is horizontal and done by those who believe they have greater integrity or more sophisticated analyses. They become the self-appointed guardians of political purity.

Call-outs make people fearful of being targeted. People avoid meaningful conversations when hypervigilant perfectionists point out apparent mistakes, feeding the cannibalistic maw of the cancel culture. Shaming people for when they "woke up" presupposes rigid political standards for acceptable discourse and enlists others to pile on. Sometimes it's just ruthless hazing.

We can change this culture. Calling-in is simply a call-out done with love. Some corrections can be made privately. Others will necessarily be public, but done with respect. It is not tone policing, protecting white fragility or covering up abuse. It helps avoid the weaponization of suffering that prevents constructive healing.

Calling-in engages in debates with words and actions of healing and restoration, and without the self-indulgence of drama. And we can make productive choices about the terms of the debate: Conflicts about coalition-building, supporting candidates or policies are a routine and desirable feature of a pluralistic democracy.

You may never meet a member of the Klan or actively teach incarcerated people, but everyone can sit down with people they don't agree with to work toward solutions to common problems.

In 2017, as a college professor in Massachusetts, I accidentally misgendered a student of mine during a lecture. I froze in shame, expecting to be blasted. Instead, my student said, "That's all right; I misgender myself sometimes." We need more of this kind of grace.

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