



BUILDING COMMUNITY SAFETY

REFLECTIONS ON OUR POWER IN TIMES OF BIGOTRY | OCTOBER 28, 2016

In the past couple of months there have been a string of violent attacks on Muslim individuals in New York City. These attacks include the [killing of Imam Akonjee and his assistant Thara Uddin in Ozone Park](#), the [killing of Nazma Khanam in Jamaica](#), [assaults on women with strollers in a Brooklyn park](#), and [the setting of fire to a woman's hijab in Manhattan](#). These attacks have contributed devastatingly to the perpetual mourning and fear that our communities in NYC live in everyday. They happen during a present political landscape of Islamophobia that is systematically sanctioned by the state through policing and surveillance, rhetorically peddled by politicians, and carried out in incidents of violence in the daily lives of working-class Arabs, Middle Easterners, Muslims, and South Asians (AMEMSA). As a community organization of working-class South Asian—predominantly Muslim—immigrants, we affirm the experiences of our communities and the need to feel protected and safe. Consequently, this piece is a reflection on many of the conversations within DRUM's membership and our communities on the meanings of safety.

Fearful communities are not powerful communities, and fear divides us from one another when it narrows our thinking to focus on our own grievances and point blame at others instead of collectively imagining transformative solutions. While many members of our communities have been quick to use the recent violent attacks to call for hate crime designations, DRUM members and leaders, many of whom themselves have been victims of governmental policies and bias-motivated violence, believe that asking the police to protect us is not the answer. Hate crime designation is another mode of giving the state permission to criminalize Black and Brown individuals and communities under the guise of “attacking hate” and “ending violence”. This is the way it has been applied opportunistically in this country. The demand for designating these incidents as hate crimes, often with little evidence, has been pushed by leaders in our communities in the wake of these attacks. This demand comes from the mistaken desire that in prostrating as “perfect victims”, America will recognize our people's humanity. Yet victimhood never granted a deeper recognition of humanity to any oppressed group in America; hate crime legislation, designation, or prosecutions never protected Black people who are regularly murdered by the police, nor will it protect the rest of us.

What will protect us if the police won't? Not all voices have been calling for policies that criminalize as a response to violent attacks. Many have been organizing their communities to come together to mourn, express outrage, and come to collective understandings about where hatred and fear of Muslims comes from and how it is located in a larger spectrum of violence in America. The Islamophobia experienced by AMEMSA communities across America, especially the working-class Muslims who make up a majority of DRUM's membership, is authorized by the state as it wages profitable wars on predominantly Muslim countries and criminalizes Muslims who live in its borders. It is not surprising that individuals who are steeped in such a culture of war and militarism would play out these attacks on individual Muslims. We must unite with

sour communities about needing to be protected and stop violence by getting at its root, not by appealing to the same state that abuses us.

A good example of setting the stage for building power is in the histories of Black Muslim communities. For years, in the aftermath of incidents of violence against immigrant Muslim communities, Black imams in NYC have consistently asked “Why do you think these incidents almost never happen to us [Black Muslims]?” only to be met with silence. Historical accounts of the development of Black Muslim communities established as early as the 1930s always tell a story of deep and active engagement by community members to make their neighborhoods safer, inclusive, and more socially just. [These efforts focused on building genuine relationships, identifying common problems, and taking collective action in partnerships with others to resolve those problems.](#) These problems spanned the full range from street violence, drugs, unemployment, street safety, to schools and education. [These models of organized communities set an example for others which earned Black Muslim communities respect.](#) For the instances where such respect was not accorded, there was also infrastructure created for self-defense and security of Muslims along with others. In some cases, while these efforts or infrastructure no longer remain, the respect for Muslim communities has lasted in those neighborhoods. We do not intend to romanticize or fetishize these histories, or minimize the particularities of Black Muslim communities and histories, but to point out examples of *what is possible*. We also want to highlight that these examples were not dependent on one ‘leader.’ While there were sometimes instances of charismatic leaders, fundamentally these histories were a result of collective effort and broad participation by the members of those communities.

The current responses that proclaim attacks as Islamophobic or hate crimes without conclusive evidence are disturbing precisely because they don’t build collective power. In Ozone Park, the reasons behind the killing of the imam and his assistant are still unknown. We do know that the neighborhood has years of ethnic tensions between the Bangladeshi and Latino communities. Rather than claiming victimhood and mobilizing blame to position ourselves as ‘saviors’ or ‘protectors’ of our communities, we should build consciousness and capacity to lift ourselves up as the *‘builders’ of our peace*, which is a natural outcome of the process of genuine community building. Building our power, like building peace and community, is very different and much more rigorous work than “showing” our power by bringing out large numbers of people, or media appearances, or mobilizing elected officials in the wake of a violent incident. Building power looks *within* for grassroots solutions that transform, rather than calling out for support from the police or from government policies, which have histories of not only abusing us, but also of utilizing these moments to further own agendas. Building power means that people in the local affected communities are themselves transformed and more organized, more aware, and more skilled, than they were before.

The examples of Black Muslim communities are not alone. Many of our communities come from histories and traditions of creating safety through building community. There are several other efforts in New York City like [CopWatch](#), [ManUp!](#), and [Audre Lorde Project’s Safe Outside the System Collective](#) that work to combat violence in such ways. Communities across the country and the globe have built different systems based on their needs and contexts. Though we experience attacks, we are not victims; we are powerful when we see how our experiences of violence are materially connected and unite to take action and make systematic change happen.