

**Brothers and Sisters Unite: Take Back the Night  
in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City**

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**Abstract**

Using archival documents from the GLBT Historical Society, Schlesinger Library, and Iowa Women's Archives, this research argues that Take Back the Night marches during the late 1970s and early 1980s in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City followed similar patterns: they were motivated by local events, constructed meaning for attendees through similar structural elements, and struggled with the dilution of their messages and goals because of conflict. Existing research does not create concrete understandings of Take Back the Night based on comparisons or research on more than one event and geographic location, instead focusing on the broader feminist anti-violence movement, including potential causes of Take Back the Night, such as developing understandings of rape, increasing awareness of rape, and increasing opposition to violent pornography and media. This research explores how feminist anti-violence motivations manifested in Take Back the Night events in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City, highlighting these communities' awareness of local statistics/frequency of attacks, knowledge of publicized trials and crimes (often serial), and organizers' thoughts on pornography and media. Take Back the Night's meaning is considered through examination of common elements of testimony and physical reclaiming of space, and how these elements created meaning for attendees. This research also argues that the message and goal of Take Back the Night were diluted by conflicts among organizers and with their surrounding communities, including disagreements about the role of pornography, the exclusion of women of color, and the exclusion of men.

## Introduction

*“All women know the fear of walking alone at night.”<sup>1</sup>*

A hand slides up your skirt, grabs your wrist, or pinches your ass. A man blocks your path. A man shouts at you from across the street. A man follows you, screaming “compliments” from his car. If you make it home safely, a father, brother, boyfriend, or husband hits you. If you make it home safely, you’re told that what happened on the way home is somehow your fault. A woman taking a walk in her neighborhood in San Francisco, a young professional walking home from a late night at the office in Cambridge, and a student crossing College Green Park in Iowa City all face the same fear. Gendered violence, whether in the form of catcalling, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, rape, or even murder, is a constant fear among women, at any age, in any space, in any era.

These fears that women expressed during the peak of Take Back the Night were not just fears, but their reality. As individuals involved in Take Back the Night in Cambridge stated, the violence of men “[makes] fear a part of [their] day-to-day lives.”<sup>2</sup> Women who were out on the street, especially if they were in an area known for pornography and/or sex work or if they were women of color, were considered “either sexually suspect or sexually vulnerable,” making them fair targets in “a ‘free-fire zone.’”<sup>3</sup> In response to the fear and reality of gendered violence,

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<sup>1</sup> “Take Back the Night pamphlet for August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1978,” 1978, [Take Back the Night], 1978-1979, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>2</sup> “How many times have you been afraid to walk down the street at night”, 1978, [Take Back the Night], 1978-1979, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>3</sup> Kirsten Delegard, “Contested Geography: The Campaign against Pornography and the Battle for Urban Space in Minneapolis,” in *U.S. Women’s History: Untangling the Threads of Sisterhood*, ed. Leslie Brown, Jacqueline L. Castledine, and Anne M. Valk (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 171-172.

especially on the street, at night, and in these pornography districts, women began to take back the night by holding rallies and speakouts, and then marching in their neighborhoods to protest gendered violence.

The term gendered violence refers to a spectrum of violence experienced by women, including sexual violence, in addition to verbal violence, intimate partner violence, stalking, human trafficking, murder, and harmful traditional practices. In this paper, the term gendered violence is used to encapsulate the wide range of experiences that motivated women to organize during this time and were shared and protested at Take Back the Night. These women who chose to take back the night were typically middle and upper-class, cisgender, White women. Although organizers saw their protest and message as universal to all women, including women of color, they often chose to focus solely on a binary view of the gendered violence directed toward cisgender White women from cisgender White men. This choice meant that they ignored or at least did not meaningfully recognize the significance of other social factors, such as race and class. Although some organizers touched on these complexities and aimed for an *accessible* universal message, essentialism and ignorance of diversity were central to their understanding of gendered violence and the formulation of their ideals and arguments. Despite organizers' failure to meaningfully address these social factors and incorporate them into their organizing efforts and movement, understanding the reality that resulted in feelings of fear for so many women sometimes bridged these shortcomings.

Feminist historians argue that gendered violence has affected women throughout history as a result of patriarchal values and structures. Although informative historical statistics on rape and intimate partner violence are scarce, this is due to the lack of structured reporting methods and limited understanding of gendered violence rather than the inexistence of gendered violence in the past. Today, fears and understandings of gendered violence have transformed. There are

resources available for survivors, more inclusive definitions of victims and victimization, and better structures for reporting gendered violence. Advocates today have moved past the binary view of gendered violence held by many in the 1970s. Regardless of an overall decline or increase in the prevalence of gendered violence, which is difficult to determine due to the changes and progress made in reporting and resources, norms around gendered violence have shifted greatly.

During the women's rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, communities came to better understand rape as a criminal act against women rather than a property crime against women's male relatives.<sup>4</sup> Awareness of gendered violence grew through publicized criminal trials; this growing awareness was also demonstrated by the increase in shelters, hotlines, and rape crisis centers.<sup>5</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, catalyzed by other social justice movements, anger rose against gendered violence and the society and culture that encouraged and/or allowed violence. Gendered violence was framed as "male violence" during this era, and many women grew tired of the cycle of harm that they experienced. This change is demonstrated by the creation of groups such as Women Against Rape (WAR) in Detroit and Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM) in San Francisco, which challenged society's acceptance of gendered violence and the propagation of materials that showcased it.<sup>6</sup>

This paper uses sources from three geographic locations to build a broader understanding of the motivations, meaning, and conflicts present in Take Back the Night in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Women Against Violence in Pornography and the

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Gordon, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*. First ed, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 120.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, (New York: Viking, 2000), 182.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Currans, *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts, and Concerned Mothers: Women Transforming Public Space*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 23.

Media (WAVPM) Records from the GLBT Historical Society Archives are used to create an understanding of the 1978 Take Back the Night March in San Francisco. Materials on Take Back the Night in Cambridge were accessed from the Schlesinger Library within the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University; the primary collection used to build a narrative about Cambridge Take Back the Night and its organizers is the Cambridge Women's Center Records. Most materials on Iowa City Take Back the Night used in this paper are from the Iowa Women's Archives. From the Iowa Women's Archives, the University of Iowa Women's Resource and Action Center Records and the Tess Catalano Papers comprise most of the documents used for this paper's analysis of Take Back the Night in Iowa City. Tess Catalano was a prominent activist during her time at the University of Iowa, and her papers reflect the more personal and underlying perspectives of organizers. This analysis is supplemented with documents from the University of Iowa Women's Caucus, which were found in the New Wave Party Records from the University of Iowa Archives.

San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City were chosen to facilitate the examination of this movement due to the differences between each location and the timing of their primary marches, which lend themselves to a comparative study and the identification of broader patterns of Take Back the Night organizing across the United States. These three locations represent both coasts and America's heartland. San Francisco covers "big city" community organizers largely unassociated with a college, while Cambridge demonstrates the work of organizers partially separated from the influences of a larger city and its college campuses, and Iowa City represents the perspective of smaller, college town organizers who were primarily students. Each of these locations had marches in 1978, 1979, or both, which were well documented, making them ideal for a comparative study of Take Back the Night at its height. Iowa City and Cambridge continued to hold marches during the 1980s, and sources on these marches are used in this paper

to create a more complex understanding of the history of Take Back the Night and its conflict with the surrounding community. These sources also demonstrate the pattern of conflict and backlash that organizers faced beginning in the late 1970s and continued into the 1980s.

This research identifies the motivations, meanings, and conflicts of Take Back the Night in the late 1970s and early 1980s, across the United States in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City. The 1978 San Francisco Take Back the Night came out of the anti-pornography movement, while Take Back the Night events in Cambridge were frequently sparked by publicized crimes, and Take Back the Night in Iowa City developed out of growing frustration over the number of attacks and rapes that were occurring in the Iowa City community during the 1970s and early 1980s. All three of these marches were motivated not only by frustration about the broader issue of gendered violence, but also by local events. Take Back the Night marches in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City used testimony, artwork, and/or the physical reclaiming of space to resist societal ideas about gendered violence and create feelings of community, safety, and strength, ultimately constructing meaning for attendees. Organizers in all three locations experienced conflicts within organizing groups and with the surrounding communities which ultimately led to the dilution of the organizers' intended message and derailment of the original goal of Take Back the Night.

## What is “Take Back the Night?”



Figure 1: “Night,” Tim Severa, *Daily Iowan*, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1982, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

Take Back the Night, also known internationally as Reclaim the Night, began in the mid-1970s. The specific origins of the march are difficult to identify, as many marches cite local motivations, in addition to acknowledging the history and presence of other marches nationwide and worldwide. Historians argue that a 1975 march in Philadelphia was the earliest Take Back the Night.<sup>7</sup> The Take Back the Night Foundation itself also cites the 1975 Philadelphia march as an early march, if not the earliest.<sup>8</sup> Historians have also identified marches in 1975 and 1976 in Europe, one taking place after the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Belgium in 1976, as early international Take Back the Night/Reclaim the Night events.<sup>9</sup> Take Back the Night/Reclaim the Night, regardless of when or where the first march was technically held, has become a worldwide movement especially prominent in North America and on college campuses.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*. First ed, 120.

<sup>8</sup> “History: Take Back the Night: Action against Sexual Assault,” Take Back the Night | End Sexual & Domestic Violence | Get Help!, *Take Back the Night Foundation*, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://takebackthenight.org/history/>.

<sup>9</sup> Finn Mackay, *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 72.

Take Back the Night was motivated by both the successes of feminist organizers in the 1970s and the backlash resulting from those successes. Take Back the Night was preceded by the creation of Title IX, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision. These “wins” encouraged feminists to further advocate for and assert their bodily autonomy, perhaps through Take Back the Night, where organizers argued that women’s bodies belonged to themselves, and therefore men were not entitled to them simply because women were in public unaccompanied by male “protectors.” Sources from Cambridge Take Back the Night indicate that despite their acknowledgment of recent increasing rights for women, some women felt that the existing criminal-legal system was a “dead end.”<sup>10</sup> This cynicism towards the criminal-legal system was exacerbated by the failure of law enforcement to hold perpetrators accountable and the scapegoating of Black men, although some law enforcement officers had begun to care about cases of gendered violence.<sup>11</sup>

The “mushrooming” of rape crisis centers and other organizations for women during the 1970s did not just lead to a better understanding of rape, but an understanding of the breadth of the problem of gendered violence, with statistics to back up organizers’ arguments.<sup>12</sup> With this increasing awareness and the resulting lessening of victims’ shame around gendered violence, gendered violence was no longer a solely “private” issue. Take Back the Night aimed to contribute to the lessening of shame and stigma surrounding gendered violence. Through the element of testimony, Take Back the Night invites individual participants to publicly share their experiences of violence as a way of understanding violence and its impact. Before Take Back the

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<sup>10</sup> “Take Back the Night: A Short History,” September 1978, [Take Back the Night], 1978-1979, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>11</sup> “THE WILLIE SANDERS CASE: An Appeal to Allston-Brighton,” 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>12</sup> “Take Back the Night: Speaking Out,” Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

Night, “rape speak outs” and consciousness-raising made gendered violence a public issue and inspired the use of testimony at Take Back the Night.<sup>13</sup> Organizers within the women’s anti-violence movement were motivated to take back the night and protest gendered violence by the increased information that resulted from previous feminist activism.

In addition to the feminist and civil rights wins of the 1960s and 1970s, obscenity laws were loosened in the US. Some feminists saw this as a win against conservatism, while others saw pornography as a violation of women’s civil rights. Feminist anti-pornography activists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon resisted the relaxation of obscenity laws and considered the “proliferation of pornographic bookstores and movie theaters” as harmful to women. They argued that pornography set scripts for women’s oppression and undermined their safety.<sup>14</sup> Many feminists also identified the increasing prevalence of images of violence against women, including physical assault, rape, child molestation, and murder, that were used in pornography. Anti-pornography feminists highlighted the spread of violent porn “from ‘special hard-core’ magazines/shops to larger mass media,” and its contribution to the normalization of violence against women. They saw this increase in violent images and the severity of violence portrayed as correlated with, and causing, increasing numbers of attacks on women. Drawing connections between popular pornographic films such as *Snuff* and *Depthroat* and descriptions of assaults and injuries they encountered as activists and advocates, these anti-pornography feminists blamed pornography for gendered violence.<sup>15</sup> The increased presence of pornographic bookstores and movie theaters, and the perceived increase in the amount and severity of images

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Valk, “Take Back the Night and the Public Memory of Feminism,” in *U.S. Women’s History: Untangling the Threads of Sisterhood*, ed. Leslie Brown, Jacqueline L. Castledine, and Anne M. Valk (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 188.

<sup>14</sup> Delegard, “Contested Geography: The Campaign against Pornography and the Battle for Urban Space in Minneapolis,” 166-168.

<sup>15</sup> Laura Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography*, (New York, Morrow, 1980), 16-19.

of gendered violence in pornography and mass media, motivated many feminists to Take Back the Night.

The backlash from the feminist achievements of the 1960s and 1970s also spurred feminist activists to protest gendered violence. This is especially evident from the responses of certain men to feminist activism. Although some men saw the increase in women's rights as long overdue and positive, others found themselves opposed, consciously or unconsciously. Some men who witnessed feminists' work supporting the protection of women's human and civil rights during this era labeled feminists as mentally unstable and in need of male supervision.<sup>16</sup> Other men who claimed they were supportive of women's rights and the feminist movement failed to listen to women's voices and instead criticized women's organizing methods rather than meaningfully supporting the feminist movement. Following backlash from men on the 1979 Take Back the Night in Iowa City, in a letter to the editor in the *Daily Iowan*, Leona Durham highlighted this discrepancy, asking:

What those men...were doing last year to combat the increasing violence against women in Iowa City? Snickering their way through the city's most publicized rape trial? Engaging in a little "innocent" catcalling on the street? Telling a (not) funny little sexist joke or two?...In any event, you can just bet that none of them were sufficiently organizing to combat the phenomenon.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of supporting women's organizing and centering the voices of those primarily harmed by gendered violence, men resented feminists who were not inclusive and agreeable enough for them. Men drove cars toward Take Back the Night attendees, screamed at them, mooned them, and demonized them and their organizing choices in the press. As Jack Darland, Lyle Danielson, John Gottberg, and Robert Halvorson wrote, they thought feminists should feel,

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<sup>16</sup> Deleard, "Contested Geography: The Campaign against Pornography and the Battle for Urban Space in Minneapolis," 174.

<sup>17</sup> "Readers: More on Take Back the Night," *Daily Iowan*, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Take Back the Night, Women's Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women's Archives.

“shame, shame, shame,” for their organizing choices.<sup>18</sup> In the letters and articles that men wrote while claiming that they were “supportive” of Take Back the Night’s goal, their tone suggests that they were bitter over the fact that feminists did not prioritize men’s voices in this movement. Men’s immediate criticism of feminists, coupled with their inaction within the feminist movement and silence on feminist issues at other times, suggest that they may have just been looking for a reason to oppose feminist organizing. Some men correctly identified themselves as supportive to the cause, listening to the concerns of feminists and calling out their peers. Demonstrating this, Frank Gersh outlined in his letter to the editor that “if men want to be seen as other than potential rapists, they should do what they can to stop their brothers’ harassment and abuse of women.”<sup>19</sup> But Gersh was atypical. More commonly, feminists’ concerns were dismissed, and they were attacked for their activism. As the University of Iowa activist Tess Catalano expressed, “even in my action I am victimized.”<sup>20</sup>

Historians identify Take Back the Night as a “feminist tactic” used to resist harmful ideas regarding women’s occupation of public space at night and victim-blaming. Feminists aimed to shift blame from female victims to male perpetrators.<sup>21</sup> The goals of Take Back the Night functioned to “complement and expand” the existing network of rape crisis centers and shelters that had blossomed during the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Take Back the Night was based upon another feminist tactic of reclaiming public and urban space, related to the “politics of place,” which outlines that

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<sup>18</sup> “Readers: More TBN debate,” *Daily Iowan*, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1979, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>19</sup> “Who to trust?,” Frank Gersh, *Daily Iowan*, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>20</sup> “And what about Take Back the Night,” Tess Catalano, Catalano’s assessment of the event, Tess Catalano Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*. First ed, 120.

<sup>22</sup> Valk, “Take Back the Night and the Public Memory of Feminism,” 188.

gender hierarchies shaped the everyday geographies that women encountered.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, women unashamedly present in spaces considered “male,” or indecent and unsafe for women, participated in political activism. This definition is important while considering the structure and effect of Take Back the Night; women were not only protesting gendered violence, but asserting their right to safely exist in public spaces. Women from across the U.S., and the world, chose to protest violence committed against them and asserted their rights through the hosting of Take Back the Night marches throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Today, women still take back the night, especially on college campuses.<sup>24</sup>

The inability to pinpoint a specific starting point for the Take Back the Night movement is not an issue for continuing scholarship since historians recognize that Take Back the Night was a “mass action arm” of the broader women’s anti-violence movement. Historians acknowledge that Take Back the Night often had local motivations and there was “minimal coordination across sites,” despite organizers’ awareness of the history of Take Back the Night, which they used (and still use) to establish credibility.<sup>25</sup> The broad, disconnected nature of Take Back the Night, even though organizers were aware of other marches and built off of existing ideas within the women’s anti-violence movement, establishes a pattern of distinct local motivations and contrastingly, structural and ideological similarities.

## **San Francisco**

### *Motivations*

In San Francisco, Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM) held the 1978 National Feminist Conference on Pornography. As a part of this conference, the

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<sup>23</sup> Delegard, “Contested Geography: The Campaign against Pornography and the Battle for Urban Space in Minneapolis,” 167-170.

<sup>24</sup> Currans, *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts, and Concerned Mothers: Women Transforming Public Space*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Valk, “Take Back the Night and the Public Memory of Feminism,” 188-190.

group decided to incorporate a Take Back the Night march, specifically through the pornography district.<sup>26</sup> WAVPM claimed that “pornography is directly related to the climate of violence against women in this society.” Organizers cited the knowledge of law enforcement agencies, who they claimed identified porn as a “causative factor in crimes of sexual violence.”<sup>27</sup> Although the group primarily focused on pornography, WAVPM stated that their march was in response to “the rise in rape, woman-battering, pornography, and other forms of sexual violence to women.”<sup>28</sup> This message demonstrates that WAVPM was originally motivated by their opposition to pornography and the gendered violence depicted in it, and that their cause expanded to include protesting gendered violence that existed on the streets, in homes, and in real life, not just that perpetrated or encouraged in the media.

WAVPM’s opposition to pornography was clear in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, a book by organizers and supporters of the 1978 conference and march, which included contributions by several significant feminists and anti-pornography activists like Audre Lorde, Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin, Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, and Adrienne Rich.<sup>29</sup> This book demonstrates the breadth of the feminist anti-pornography movement, which is frequently dismissed and omitted by feminists and historians as a sex-negative “perversion of feminism.”<sup>30</sup> The anthology outlined how pornography degraded women and encouraged violence against them, rather than freeing sensuality or sexuality as other feminists and liberals

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<sup>26</sup> Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> “Message by Women Against Violence in Pornography & the Media,” 1978, Conference – Take Back the Night March | Events/Programs | WAVPM Records, WAVPM Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Organizers compiled this anthology after the conference and march, in remembrance and to further express their varying views and opposition to pornography.

<sup>30</sup> Deleard, “Contested Geography: The Campaign against Pornography and the Battle for Urban Space in Minneapolis,” 168.

argued during this era. This book argued that pornography was a “male invention,” therefore it was not intended to liberate women’s sexuality, but to reduce them to sexual objects.<sup>31</sup>

Alice Walker’s writing in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* illuminated the relationship between gender, race, pornography, and degradation through a creative writing piece titled “Coming Apart.” The presence of this piece in the anthology seems significant since other organizers during this time struggled to recognize the combined influences of racism and sexism that women of color, particularly Black women, experienced. WAVPM saw violent pornography as a cause of gendered violence, not a result; their opposition to pornography as the root of gendered violence therefore manifested in *Take Back the Night*.

### *Meaning*

During the November 1978 *Take Back the Night* march in San Francisco, WAVPM chose to march through the Tenderloin neighborhood, which was known for its sex work and pornography industry, reclaiming these spaces for women and protesting the violence shown in pornography and experienced by women who participated in sex work.<sup>32</sup> The feminist anti-pornography activist Andrea Dworkin opened the march with a speech, during which she stated that, “tonight we are going to walk together, all of us, to take back the night, as women have in cities all over the world, because in every sense none of us can walk alone.”<sup>33</sup> This quote illustrates how organizers intended for women to cultivate community and feel strong at *Take Back the Night*, and especially wanted women’s presence at this event to reclaim an area they identified as unsafe. By marching together, through locations considered “unsafe” like the pornography district, organizers created meaning for attendees by facilitating an event where

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<sup>31</sup> Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Participation Materials from Women Against Pornography Conference 1979, NYC, WAVPM Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives.

<sup>33</sup> Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography*, 290.

women could reclaim a potentially dangerous area and feel safe, strong, and surrounded by community.

The march in San Francisco in 1978 was also intended to create a safe space for women to express their anger at a society that allows violence.<sup>34</sup> Distinct from organizers' efforts to create feelings of community, safety, and strength, organizers' creation of a safe space for women to express their anger allowed women to release the feelings they brought with them to the march. Organizers note that the goal of the march was to "protest the violence against women portrayed and encouraged by pornography," claiming that pornography was "responsible for real-life violence against women."<sup>35</sup> By noting this intention and inviting supportive individuals to express their opposition, organizers created a space for women to express their opposition and anger at their fear-filled reality.

Take Back the Night usually incorporates the element of testimony by "providing a soapbox" or microphone and leaving space open for women to come up and speak according to their desire and comfort level.<sup>36</sup> Although the march began with a speech by the anti-pornography activist Andrea Dworkin, records do not indicate that other individuals from the crowd or the conference were invited to speak during the event.<sup>37</sup> In her speech, Dworkin stated that the streets of San Francisco, "for an hour, and for the first time ever, ...belonged not to the barkers, pimps, or pornographers, but instead to the songs, voices, rage, and vision of thousands of women."<sup>38</sup> This demonstrates that at the 1978 Take Back the Night in San Francisco, although

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<sup>34</sup> Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography*, 15-16.

<sup>35</sup> Press release from WAVPM, October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1978, Conference – Take Back the Night March | Events/Programs, WAVPM Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives.

<sup>36</sup> "Some Ideas on How to Take Back the Night," Take Back the Night, Women's Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women's Archives.

<sup>37</sup> Press release by WAVPM, 1978, Conference – Take Back the Night March | Events/Programs, WAVPM Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives.

<sup>38</sup> Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography*, 286.

a speakout was not held, organizers intended for women to express their opposition to pornography and sexual violence through their collective voice. Take Back the Night, in different forms, allowed and encouraged women to speak out against gendered violence, express their rage and pain, and create community and safety from their shared experiences.

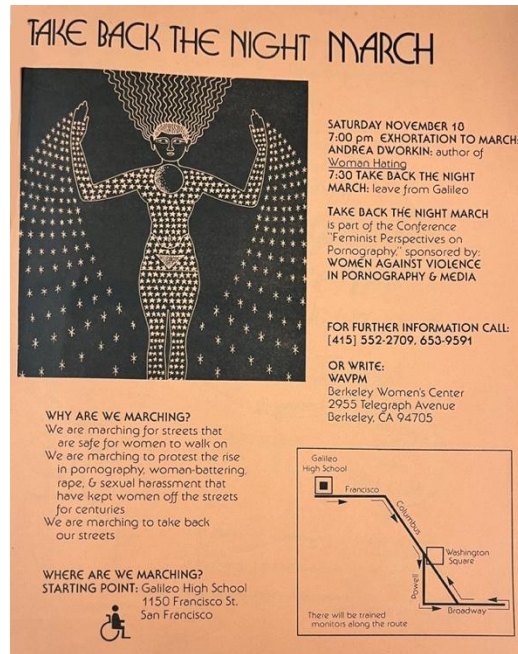


Figure 2: “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT MARCH” poster, 1978, WAVPM Records, Conference – Take Back the Night March | Events/Programs, WAVPM Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives.

At the 1978 San Francisco Take Back the Night, organizers also staged artwork to oppose pornography and violence against women. In materials advertising and explaining the march, organizers described the artistic performance that was planned to take place in the street during the march. During these performances, women destroyed pornography and expressed how pornography objectified women and encouraged rape. Their art also addressed the “cultural history behind contemporary pornography and violent images of women,” by addressing the “good girl” and “bad girl” dichotomy, the “virgin” trope, and more. Artists aimed to reclaim these stereotypical images through their artwork and with the participation of attendees, destroy

pornography and its messages of objectification.<sup>39</sup> Although organizers of other marches used art to express themselves, San Francisco organizer's deliberate and obvious usage of art to reclaim images of women was distinctive. By encouraging attendees to participate in the "celebratory ritual," they pushed them to create meaning by allowing them to reclaim and protest these images themselves, physically and artistically.

### *Conflicts*

In a press release for the 1978 Take Back the Night in San Francisco, WAVPM notes that pornography is a "controversial issue," which demonstrates its role as a conflict within the feminist anti-violence movement.<sup>40</sup> That WAVPM felt the need to address this in a press release indicates that they were aware of or anticipated disagreement from the public and potential supporters. Organizers had to negotiate their goals and intents with the views of their community and those held within the same movement.

Participation materials from the 1979 Women Against Pornography Conference in New York, a follow-up to the 1978 National Feminist Conference on Pornography in San Francisco, discussed the difference between lesbian erotica and lesbian pornography that assumed a heterosexual male gaze.<sup>41</sup> This noted difference between erotica and porn with a male gaze exemplifies the conflict between the feminist anti-pornography movement and other feminists, specifically queer feminists. However, organizers' awareness of this distinction could have meant that there was space for queer feminists in Take Back the Night, who felt comfortable

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<sup>39</sup> "TAKE BACK THE NIGHT MARCH," 1978, Conference – Take Back the Night March | Events/Programs, WAVPM Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives.

<sup>40</sup> Release from WAVPM, October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1978, Conference – Take Back the Night March | Events/Programs, WAVPM Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives.

<sup>41</sup> Participation Materials from Women Against Pornography Conference 1979, NYC, WAVPM Records, GLBT Historical Society Archives.

expressing their sexuality through erotica, but uncomfortable with heterosexual men's objectification and violence that was portrayed in mainstream pornography.

### Cambridge



Figure 3: “women unite | take back the night | august 18 1979,” 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

### *Motivations*

In Cambridge, women were motivated by frequent attacks, rapes, and murders of women.<sup>42</sup> These attacks, rapes, and murders were “well publicized,” which motivated women to organize marches and mobilize their communities.<sup>43</sup> Women in Cambridge were also motivated to take back the night due to their growing frustration with feeling unsafe on the streets and

<sup>42</sup> “Agenda for Take Back the Night Meeting April 23, 1979,” 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>43</sup> “women unite | take back the night | august 18 1979,” 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

seeing pornography and media that promoted gendered violence.<sup>44</sup> The Cambridge Take Back the Night Coalition stated that the threat of violence was always present for women, especially on the street and at night. They also explained how they were “assaulted every day by stereotypic images of women,” and how self-determination and control were denied to women in many aspects of life, including “in the distorted images of women in the media.” The coalition also discusses that, “...male violence may be strongly incited by pornographic viewing habits, and that pornography teaches, fosters, and reinforces crimes of sexual hatred against women.” Although organizers acknowledged that there was no group consensus about this claim, it was supported significantly enough to include in a document about their principles.<sup>45</sup> These sentiments illustrate the motivations of Cambridge organizers: they were frustrated with the violence they experienced on the street and saw in the media.

Cambridge organizers also responded to specific crimes. In a pamphlet providing information about the 1979 Take Back the Night, organizers refer to the serial rapes of eight women in Allston-Brighton, two adjacent Boston neighborhoods. Organizers included recent crimes as proof of necessity for holding a Take Back the Night, or as they phrased it, as “bitter reminders of the violence that is committed daily against women.”<sup>46</sup> While planning for the 1979 event, Cambridge organizers contemplated coordinating their march with other neighborhoods responding to publicized crimes, mentioning the Roxbury murders and the Allston rapes.<sup>47</sup> According to one group involved in planning the 1979 Take Back the Night in Cambridge, the

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<sup>44</sup> “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT,” Take Back the Night: statement, principles, supports & demands, 1978, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>45</sup> “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT,” Take Back the Night: statement, principles, supports & demands, 1978, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>46</sup> “women unite | take back the night | august 18 1979,” 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>47</sup> “Agenda for Take Back the Night Meeting April 23, 1979,” April 23, 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

march was a response to the “brutal murders of several Black women which have taken place in the South End, Roxbury, and Dorchester over the course of the last eight months.”<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, a Take Back the Night march organized by the nearby Dorchester Women’s Committee and Dorchester Green Lite Program cited that, “in the past year alone 14 women have been brutally murdered in this greater Boston area.....countless others have been raped, robbed, beaten...”<sup>49</sup> Demonstrating how motivating local, publicized crimes against women were, Cambridge organizers took the locations of crimes into consideration while planning march routes. In the minutes from a planning meeting, an organizer noted that, “one of the women was murdered on Comm. Ave.; perhaps we should march there.”<sup>50</sup> These examples demonstrate a pattern of consideration of recent, local, publicized crimes during march planning, and the motivating nature of these crimes for organizers.

### *Meaning*

Organizers of the 1978 Cambridge Take Back the Night planned for women to march together to create feelings of strength and community.<sup>51</sup> They also believed that the physical reclaiming of space through marching and protest would communicate that “violence is a part of our lives that we will no longer tolerate.”<sup>52</sup> Organizers further demonstrated that the reclaiming of public space created feelings of community by saying that the march “confirmed that our

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<sup>48</sup> Letter from CRISIS to Press, 1979, Take Back the Night Publicity, 1979-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>49</sup> Take Back the Night poster from Dorchester Women’s Committee & Dorchester Green Lite Program, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>50</sup> “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT – June 18, 1979 Minutes,” June 18, 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>51</sup> “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT,” Take Back the Night: statement, principles, supports & demands, 1978, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>52</sup> “women unite | take back the night | august 18 1979,” 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

common fear of violence can be changed through that common strength.”<sup>53</sup> This quote highlights their belief that the fear of gendered violence was universal for women. The conflicts faced by Cambridge organizers, outlined in the next section, expose the complex nature of this claim.

The August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1978 Take Back the Night in the Cambridge area aimed to unify different Boston neighborhoods. Although the communication and coordination between community and organizing groups in the greater Boston area was seemingly precarious and inconsistent at times, organizers from the Cambridge Women’s Center called for “women from all over Boston and Massachusetts” to take back the night.<sup>54</sup> A pamphlet on Take Back the Night supports the argument that Cambridge organizers aimed to construct meaning for attendees by creating feelings of community and bringing together surrounding areas. Under a heading titled, “How to Get Involved,” organizers outlined that they needed assistance with community organizing since they were “organizing for the March by neighborhoods.”<sup>55</sup> The unification of women from different Boston neighborhoods resulted in feelings of safety and community. Organizers stated that, “seeing the thousands of women who turned out...to march together through the streets of Boston was an incredible culmination of five months of work.”<sup>56</sup> This evidence of unification between Boston neighborhoods highlights the function of attendees reclaiming space together to create feelings of safety, community, and strength.

### *Conflicts*

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<sup>53</sup> “Take Back the Night: A Short History,” September 1978, [Take Back the Night], 1978-1979, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>54</sup> “Statement for Take Back the Night Press Conference – July 30, 1978,” 1978, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>55</sup> “women unite | take back the night | august 18 1979,” 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>56</sup> “Take Back the Night: A Short History,” September 1978, [Take Back the Night], 1978-1979, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

Documents on the publicity and direct-action efforts of Cambridge Take Back the Night organizers make conflicting statements on the inclusion of men and its extent. Some organizers thought that men had a crucial role to play in the feminist anti-violence movement, while others believed that solidarity and determination among exclusively women was the way to end violence against women. At Take Back the Night committee meetings during May and June of 1979, attendees discussed the importance of men supporting the broader issue of gendered violence, but not being involved in Take Back the Night.<sup>57</sup> The Cambridge Take Back the Night committee considered working with “mixed,” (mixed-gender), groups but seems to have ultimately decided against it.<sup>58</sup> Eventually, the committee expressed “unanimous support for an “All Women” march,” stating that “support by men could be coordinated.”<sup>59</sup> Although organizers decided that the march should be all women, they included men in other forms of activism. Men were invited to help provide childcare during the march, attend the rally after the march, and participate in direct action efforts.<sup>60</sup> Cambridge organizers believed that the problem of violence against women did require the involvement of men, but that marching at Take Back the Night was a way to show that women must work together to end violence against them, and that they did not need protection from men against other men. Ultimately, the organizers of the Cambridge Take Back the Night chose to create a “women-only” space for the march, but they seriously considered the inclusion of men and wanted to include men in related efforts that were separate from the march.

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<sup>57</sup> “Take Back the Night Minutes – June 11<sup>th</sup> 1979,” June 11, 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>58</sup> “Take Back The Night Meeting #4 – May 8,” Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>59</sup> “Take Back the Night | Notes on Organization Meeting | May 28, 1979,” May 28, 1979, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>60</sup> Take Back the Night direct action, 1978, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

According to a letter from the Dorchester Green Lite Program, organizers of the Cambridge Take Back the Night did not plan the march well and exhibited “elitist attitudes,” indicating some conflict between organizers of Take Back the Night and other community groups/organizers.<sup>61</sup> No other documents provide evidence of such conflict. It is significant to note that this is one of the only documents where the word “sisterhood” was used within Cambridge organizers’ collections. In this letter, we see the limitations of “sisterhood,” especially when it came to the shortcomings of White, middle to upper-class feminist organizers, notably their ignorance of differences among women.

However, organizers seemed concerned with the appearance of racism. According to notes from planning meetings, “the route was changed at the last minute because a mostly white march through black neighborhoods might have been seen as a racist attack and because there would be neighborhood festivals going on the same day.”<sup>62</sup> Other Take Back the Night marches were labeled as racist by feminists at the time, specifically feminists of color, because when marches primarily composed of White women took routes through neighborhoods of color, they brought the attention of law enforcement to these already vulnerable and overpoliced communities.<sup>63</sup> Even if Cambridge organizers did not intend to be racist, their “last minute” route change demonstrates the consequences of their prioritization of cisgender, White women and their initial failure to consider the needs of all women in the surrounding area. By failing to think about the effect of their actions as White women on neighborhoods and men of color, they ignored the historical precedent of harm to communities and men of color, especially Black men,

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<sup>61</sup> Letter to Take Back the Night Committee, Women’s Coalition from Dorchester Green Lite Program, Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>62</sup> “Take Back the Night Coalition | Minutes of Meeting on September 18, 1978 at 7 p.m. at the Cambridge Woman’s Center,” Take Back the Night, 1978-1980, Cambridge Women’s Center Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>63</sup> Valk, “Take Back the Night and the Public Memory of Feminism,” 200.

because of White women's fears and false accusations.<sup>64</sup> If organizers had been making meaningful efforts to include women from *all* neighborhoods of Boston, they would have been aware of community events going on in these neighborhoods. Although they did not result in intense backlash, this conflict and Cambridge organizers' shortcomings limited their "universal" message and resulted in the perceived exclusion of women of color.

## Iowa City

### *Motivations*

As seen on posters for the 1979 Iowa City Take Back the Night, the community organization RVAP (Rape Victims Advocacy Program) noted the high frequency of rapes, attempted rapes, harassments, exhibitionists, and window peekers in Iowa City. This poster asked, "do you know your neighborhood?" and demanded that "women take back the night" on September 14th.<sup>65</sup> In addition, RVAP created an informational pamphlet for Take Back the Night in the early 1980s, which provided local statistics for Johnson County, tracking an increase in sexual attacks from 1975 to 1981, increasing every year from 35 sexual attacks to 184 sexual attacks respectively.<sup>66</sup> The knowledge of the frequency and increasing number of sexual attacks in Johnson County and Iowa City motivated women to organize Take Back the Night to protest this violence. Additionally, a letter to the editor that was published in the *Daily Iowan*, a University of Iowa student newspaper, references a highly publicized rape trial that took place in Iowa City around 1978-1979.<sup>67</sup> This trial, or one like it, is also referenced in a short play that

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<sup>64</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 84-86.

<sup>65</sup> "Do you know your neighborhood?" RVAP poster, 1979, Programming & Services | Take Back the Night, Women's Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women's Archives.

<sup>66</sup> RVAP pamphlet, 1982, Take Back the Night, Women's Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women's Archives.

<sup>67</sup> "Readers: More on Take Back the Night," *Daily Iowan*, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Take Back the Night, Women's Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women's Archives.

was performed at the 1982 Take Back the Night in Iowa City, which called out the victim-blaming and secondary victimization experienced by victims during trials.<sup>68</sup> These references to rape trials in the organization and defense of Take Back the Night demonstrate that organizers in Iowa City were also motivated by the publicization of crimes in their community. Together, the awareness of the increasing number of attacks, and the publicized nature of these attacks, motivated women who wanted to feel safer in their community and speak out against harm being done against them to organize Take Back the Night.

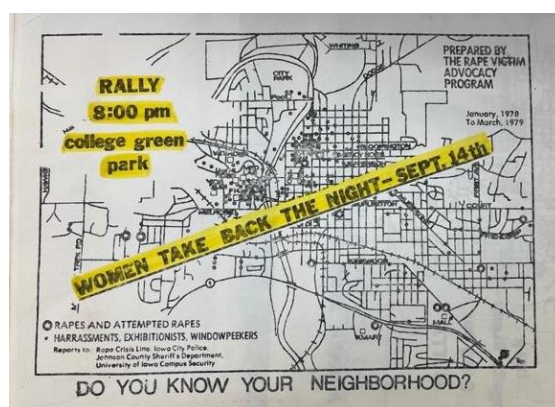


Figure 4: “Do you know your neighborhood?” RVAP poster,” 1979, Programming & Services | Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

RVAP also provided a pamphlet for Take Back the Night in the early 1980s, which listed the group Women Against Pornography, and their materials and programs, as a “resource” available for women. In this pamphlet, RVAP addressed the “role that pornography and advertising play in the perpetuation of violence toward and the objectification of women.”<sup>69</sup> In addition to RVAP’s acknowledgement of the violence that pornography perpetrates and encourages, individual activists who were a part of organizing Take Back the Night in Iowa City

<sup>68</sup> “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT Schedule of Events,” 1982, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>69</sup> RVAP pamphlet, 1982, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

during the 1980s also claimed that pornography played a role in violence against women. According to Tess Catalano, the University of Iowa activist, “violence is power. So is pornography.”<sup>70</sup> Catalano was an influential organizer of Iowa City Take Back the Night during the late 1970s and early 1980s; during this era, pornography was viewed by some organizers as a tool for exercising power and control over women, similar to gendered violence and the threat of gendered violence.

### *Meaning*

Organizers in Iowa City aimed to reclaim public space through Take Back the Night marches, ultimately creating feelings of safety and empowerment. At an Iowa City Take Back the Night in the late 1970s, organizers chose to march through “high rape” or high-risk areas, highlighting the function of marching: for women to reclaim public space from violence. They further demonstrate this goal in their suggestions of how Iowa City women can take back the night, stating that women should “claim territory” by hanging out in Iowa City and “taking back” areas one block at a time.<sup>71</sup> All of the suggestions offered by Iowa City organizers involve the presence of groups of women reclaiming public space physically, functioning to make other women feel safer in their community, therefore constructing meaning from these elements of the protest.

Iowa City Take Back the Night also included the element of testimony, which further constructed meaning by fostering a sense of community and safety. It also functioned to decrease feelings of shame and victim-blaming, creating meaning for attendees, who would feel connected to and supported by one another. A poster for the 1982 Iowa City Take Back the Night emphasized that the focus of the rally was the speakout, which was meant to “break the silence

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<sup>70</sup> “October 29,” Catalano’s assessment of the event, Tess Catalano Papers, Iowa Women’s Archive.

<sup>71</sup> “Some Ideas on How to Take Back the Night,” Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

that isolates [women] from one another.”<sup>72</sup> A pamphlet produced for Iowa City Take Back the Night in 1982 stated that the purpose of the speakout was to “experience that connection which helps us reclaim our power,” as a result of sharing “experiences and feelings about violence against women.” In a section about men and Take Back the Night, the pamphlet further highlighted the function of the speakout, for women to share and connect with each other, rather than to educate men. These documents demonstrate that the intended and resulting function of the speakout at Iowa City Take Back the Night was to create community, support, and connection among women.

### *Conflicts*

Organizers in Iowa City were apparently in “complete agreement” regarding male exclusion, coming to the decision that they should not be involved, unless at a separate event. One activist in the early 1980s, Tess Catalano, went so far as to note that if Take Back the Night organizers decided to have a separate event for men, there should be “minimal effort” put into it.<sup>73</sup> Cementing this perspective, yellow notecards were handed out to men who showed up to the 1979 Iowa City Take Back the Night. The note cards read:

GIVEN THE NATURE OF RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE, THE PRESENCE OF MEN  
HERE WILL MAKE SOME WOMEN UNCOMFORTABLE.  
MEN SENSITIVE TO THIS ISSUE WILL DEMONSTRATE THEIR CONCERN BY  
NOT ATTENDING THIS RALLY WHICH HAS BEEN ORGANIZED BY WOMEN  
FOR WOMEN.  
THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION.

These notecards, in conjunction with the opinions expressed in planning documents, demonstrate the intent of the Iowa City Take Back the Night organizers to exclude men from the event. While organizers did not explicitly say that men were not allowed to attend the event, they said they

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<sup>72</sup> “Women take back the night” poster, 1982, Take Back the Night, 1982 – meeting notes and plans, Tess Catalano Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>73</sup> “the third meeting Sun. 5<sup>th</sup> 6:30 we brought pizza,” 1982, Take Back the Night, 1982 – meeting notes and plans, Tess Catalano Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives.

were not welcome and implied it using these notecards and by suggesting men to attend alternative events designed specifically for men. Additionally, Iowa City organizers chose to have “guards” or “security” at Take Back the Night. Ahead of time, they planned for some organizers to identify themselves with reflective armbands, “bring flashlights, whistles and paper and pen,” and “work in pairs when approaching men and the press.” They instructed these “guards” to be assertive, but not to debate or attack anyone; instead, they were supposed to highlight that this event was not intended to educate men but to allow women to talk to each other about gendered violence. Iowa City activists easily chose to exclude men and implemented strategies to do so with little conflict amongst themselves.

Articles from the *Daily Iowan*, saved in the WRAC records, demonstrate the controversy triggered in the Iowa City community by the exclusion of men in 1979 Take Back the Night. Some articles and letters to the editor outline the thoughts of community members regarding the choice to exclude or discourage men from attending Take Back the Night, while others provide reports of harassment against attendees. *Daily Iowan* editors and writers provide the thoughts of community members who were not organizers, and responses to these pieces represent the perspectives of community members who were non-organizers or supporters of Take Back the Night. One such piece was written by Michael Humes, who disagreed with the organizers’ decision to discourage men from attending Take Back the Night. Despite being aware of the alternative meeting that was available for men to show their support for the cause, Humes interpreted the cards handed out and the alternative meeting as evidence of “clear exclusionary intent.” Humes stated that this exclusion negatively affected the educational opportunity the event presented, (although education was never the goal of the organizers or the event), and sent a message that was “identifying all men with rapists.” This article did discuss the “sickening prevalence of sexual violence,” but only as a peripheral in Humes’ criticism of organizers’

methods and choices. Humes stated that “no reasonable person, be they male or female, needs to be convinced that rape...and sexual harassment are horrifying and inhuman.”<sup>74</sup> This narrative, continued by other men’s letters to the *Daily Iowan*, dismissed the issue and chose to criticize the organizers’ lack of educational efforts, rather than engage in supportive efforts and thoughtful discussion of the issue. Humes’ opposition to organizers’ exclusion of men triggered a number of other letters to the editor/pieces on Take Back the Night in the following week.

Jane Vanderbosch responded to Humes’ article, pointing that his rage got coverage while the rage of women at the rally wasn’t really covered. Vanderbosch also saw Humes’ statements as a “threat” from “supportive” men; she saw his comments as a threat that “if women irritate, hurt or anger ‘sensitive’ men, these men will retaliate by no longer being ‘supportive.’” The perspective expressed by Vanderbosch is echoed in other letters to the *Daily Iowan*, which call out a lack of coverage on the actual issue Take Back the Night was meant to address, and shame men for their lack of understanding and their arguments about being discriminated against. Vanderbosch states that, “when sensitive men aggressively argue that they are victims of reverse discrimination because they were asked to take a back seat at a rally...they lie.”<sup>75</sup> These letters from supporters and critics of the 1979 Take Back the Night demonstrate the backlash that the event caused, and the resulting focus on the exclusion of men and alleged “failure” and discrimination of the march, rather than the primary issue Take Back the Night intended to highlight.

At the 1979 Iowa City Take Back the Night, incidents of harassment and assault were reported, ultimately resulting in media attention and backlash that detracted from the intended

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<sup>74</sup> “Taking back everyone’s night,” Michael Humes, *Daily Iowan*, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>75</sup> “Readers debate Take Back the Night,” Jane Vanderbosch, *Daily Iowan*, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

message of the event. According to articles from the *Daily Iowan* and *Press Citizen*, the “flashlight-wielding, arm-banded female ‘guards’” approached men entering College Green Park and presented them with the yellow cards.<sup>76</sup> This resulted in two incidents of harassment being reported to Iowa City Police by individuals who were not attending the march. Further backlash resulted from reports that protestors had maced a man in a truck. While the man claimed that he had moved his truck forward after traffic “thinned out,” witnesses claimed otherwise. According to an eyewitness, the men in the truck were driving erratically while those marching attempted to cross the street, returning two times to speed towards attendees, “making those in its path jump to safety” each time. When women went to talk to the men in the truck, the driver again “accelerated quickly,” so the attendees maced one of the men in the car.<sup>77</sup> Articles focusing on these incidents of harassment demonstrate the backlash that attendees faced in the moment and in the media, distracting from the message of the march.

At the 1982 Take Back the Night in Iowa City, the exclusion of men and alleged acts of violence also sparked intense community backlash and division. Organizers of the 1982 Take Back the Night, once again chose to employ “guards” for the march. However, compared to the 1979 allegations of “pressure” and aggressive shining of flashlights, the “guards” at the 1982 may have taken things a step farther. *Daily Iowan* News Editor Tim Severa, who was sent to cover the march, filed charges against two women after allegedly being assaulted. Severa stated that he was “physically escorted from the park, thrown on the sidewalk, kicked and threatened.” Being escorted from the park included, according to Severa, being “dragged to the edge of the park” and “kicked and forced down the stairs” of College Green Park. Organizers Tess Catalano

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<sup>76</sup> “Anti-rape rally draws estimated 500 persons,” *Press Citizen*, September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>77</sup> “Macing was ‘provoked’ in incident after rally,” Kevin Wymore, *Daily Iowan*, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

and Amy Kratz “denied any knowledge of the incident.”<sup>78</sup> Following the article outlining Severa’s experience, many men wrote letters to the editor denouncing Take Back the Night and criticizing those involved. On the other hand, others wrote articles exposing Severa’s harassment of a former girlfriend. Quoted in this article, Severa downplays being charged with telephone harassment and organizer Tess Catalano highlights this occurrence as “an example of the ways in which men don’t seem to be able to make a personal commitment to being opposed to violence against women.”<sup>79</sup> This article demonstrates how organizers attempted to center coverage on the broader issue of gendered violence, while writers and editors focused on individual contentious incidents.

Most articles on the 1979 and 1982 Take Back the Night tended to focus on the exclusion of men, men’s disagreement with the choice to exclude them, and allegations of assault, harassment, and discrimination from both supporters of Take Back the Night and those with criticisms. Very few of the articles found in the WRAC records primarily highlighted the issue of gendered violence against women. Multiple letters from readers to the *Daily Iowan* following the 1979 and 1982 Take Back the Night point this out. According to a piece written after the backlash had died down, the result of “[focusing] on the rally’s exclusion of men...and on the alleged assault of a DI reporter,” was to “divert public concern away from the purpose of TBTN into peripheral issues.”<sup>80</sup> This demonstrates how conflicts with the surrounding Iowa City and University of Iowa community resulted in the dilution of organizers’ intended messages of Take Back the Night. A rally, speakout, and protest that was meant to decrease shame, create

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<sup>78</sup> “Reporter says female ralliers assaulted him,” Rochelle Bozman, *Daily Iowan*, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1982, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>79</sup> “Editor was accused of harassment,” Paul Boyum, *Daily Iowan*, November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

<sup>80</sup> “Rally: what was and wasn’t said,” Janet McNaughton, *Daily Iowan*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1982, Take Back the Night, Women’s Resource and Action Center Records, Iowa Women’s Archives.

community strength, and call attention to the issue of gendered violence primarily resulted in controversy, backlash against the movement, and discussions of male exclusion. As Constance Harward succinctly stated in her letter to the editor, “The incident of a male being assaulted in College Green Park has received more press than any rape I’ve read about. Get the point?”<sup>81</sup>

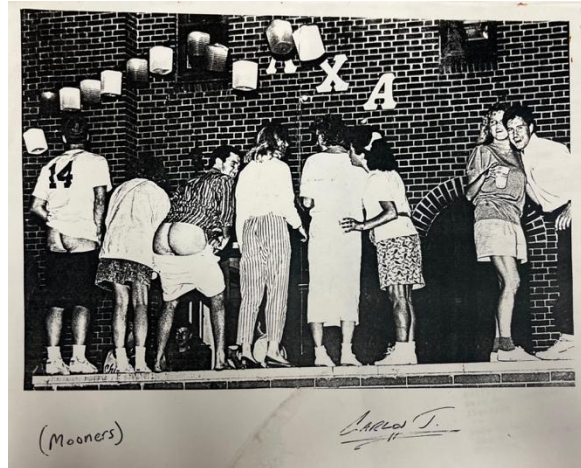


Figure 5: “(Mooners),” Women’s Caucus: Take Back the Night, Box 3, New Wave Party Records, University of Iowa Archives

The records of the New Wave Party at the University of Iowa show evidence of community response to the 1987 Take Back the Night in the form of verbal attacks and “mooning” of protestors from various East-side residence halls and a fraternity. As shown in Figure 5, one fraternity was having a party while Take Back the Night attendees marched by. In a letter sent to University of Iowa officials, the UI Women’s Caucus, the organizers of Take Back the Night in the late 1980s, called out the behavior of these fraternity men. They stated that the men had shouted “rape” at those marching, and then chose to moon, (bare their buttocks in the direction of), protestors; the UI Women’s Caucus documented this and enclosed the picture in the letter. In the same letter, other incidents of harassment towards women taking back the night were described. This included reports of another fraternity shouting, “bitches,” “gang

<sup>81</sup> “Get it?,” Constance Harward, *Daily Iowan*, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1982.

rape,” and “rape.” In addition to these behaviors displayed by fraternity men, individuals within university residence halls chose to verbally harass and throw objects at protestors.<sup>82</sup> These incidents emphasize the conflict between organizers, attendees, and observing community members.

## **Discussion**

Through the evaluation of the motivations, meaning, and conflicts of Take Back the Night in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City broader trends about Take Back the Night, its organizers’ strategies and motivations, and the effect of surrounding conflicts become apparent. Similarities in the structural elements and intended message of the march illustrate the overall goal of Take Back the Night organizers during this time. Similarities in motivations, although context-specific, demonstrate the increasing awareness of gendered violence statistics, growing resources, and evolving attitudes, especially related to shame and responsibility. The conflicts that resulted from Take Back the Night led to the dilution of the organizers’ intended messages and distraction from the original goal of Take Back the Night, to call attention to the issue of gendered violence and provide space for women to protest it and share their experiences.

Take Back the Night in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City all had similar structural elements and intended messages. Organizers often included a space for “testimony” or the expression of rage for attendees, which was intended to result in feelings of community. All of these marches included a march after a rally, protest, or speakout, which was intended to create feelings of community and collective strength, according to planning and publicity documents from organizers in each area. These marches reclaimed space physically and were intended to

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<sup>82</sup> Letter to University of Iowa officials from The UI Women’s Caucus, Women’s Caucus: Take Back the Night, Box 3, New Wave Party Records, University of Iowa Archives.

make women in these communities feel safer, even if only for the moment they joined together in protest.

Iowa City organizers wanted women to physically reclaim public space by hanging out on certain streets, similar to San Francisco organizers' ideas for women to march through the pornography and sex work district and Cambridge organizers' aim for women from all parts of Boston to march together. In all three locations, the physical reclaiming of space was intended to make women feel safer, stronger, and like they were not alone. This shows a pattern of organizers repeatedly using the structural element of reclaiming space, intending to create these feelings of safety, strength, and community.

Although less defined, testimony or the expression of rage was another element that was a part of all three Take Back the Night events in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City. In Iowa City, promotional and planning materials cited organizers' intent for women to share testimony to decrease feelings of shame and elicit realizations or affirmations of comparable experiences, to create feelings of community. This is echoed in the documents of San Francisco and Cambridge organizers, who both aimed for women to express rage at a society that ignored, excused, and/or encouraged gendered violence. However, San Francisco organizers' expression of rage took a different form than in Cambridge or Iowa City. The expression of anger in San Francisco was primarily contained with the protest and march itself, and documents from the organization of the march do not indicate an emphasis on or the presence of testimony or a speakout like in Iowa City. San Francisco organizers additionally facilitated the option for attendees to participate in performance artwork during the march, engaging attendees with an activity that was intended to allow them to express their rage. These elements that allowed women to share their experiences with gendered violence and express their rage about it together

were used by organizers in all three locations to evoke feelings of community, demonstrating the similarities between Take Back the Night organizers' use of structural elements.

Across the three locations researched, Take Back the Night resulted from similar motivations. Organizers were frustrated, angered, and disgusted by the representations and abuse of women that were perpetrated in the media, and were incensed by the frequency of crimes they witnessed or were aware of in their own communities. San Francisco organizers were obviously motivated by violence against women that was in media and pornography since they were based out of WAVPM, but organizers in Iowa City and Cambridge also cite their frustration towards representations and images of women in media. Organizers from all three locations also cite increasing frequency, or awareness, of the violence present in their own communities. They address the broader issue of gendered violence, but use local context to motivate themselves and attendees.

Although each location was motivated by the perceived and actual prevalence of gendered violence in their community, local context makes these motivations somewhat unique. The serial rapes and murders that occurred in Cambridge contrast with the harmful presence of the pornography district in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood and the publicized rape trial that took place in Iowa City. By specifically responding to local events organizers' motivations differed, even though they also wanted to call attention to the broader issue of gendered violence.

Similar to the motivations of Take Back the Night, conflicts were context and community specific. While documents do not show that organizers in Iowa City or San Francisco struggled with charges of elitism and racism, organizers in Cambridge did. This may have been due to demographics and geography. Compared to Iowa City, Cambridge was an area dominated by White young adults, surrounded by neighborhoods that were less White and less affluent, and as a result, interacted with other community groups from those neighborhoods. Cambridge

organizers fell short in their organizing efforts by failing to meaningfully and effectively communicate and work with organizing groups from communities of color. Iowa City organizers faced backlash from the surrounding community for their exclusion of men, or discouragement of their attendance at certain Take Back the Night events. Documents do not indicate that organizers in Cambridge and San Francisco experienced a similar backlash. Meanwhile, San Francisco organizers had to address divisions over pornography, rather than solely focusing on what they saw as the resulting or broader issue, gendered violence. Although they cited depictions of violence against women in the media and pornography as a motivating factor, organizers in Cambridge and Iowa City did not have to address this polarizing topic because their organizing groups were not formed around that branch of the anti-violence movement. Documents demonstrate that conflicts around Take Back the Night stemmed from choices influenced by the context in which each Take Back the Night was organized.

Despite the context and community-specific nature of conflicts at Take Back the Night, conflicts between organizers and adjacent community groups and conflicts between organizers and the surrounding community similarly resulted in the weakening of the event's general goals and dilution of the organizers' intended message. In Cambridge, since organizers aimed to united women from different Boston neighborhoods, the conflict between community groups and the exclusion of women of color detracted from their intended message of community strength. Since not all the neighborhoods of Boston, and therefore not all the women of Boston, joined together to march against gendered violence, the conflict diluted organizers' messages of strength because their goal of unification did not come to fruition. In Iowa City, the backlash and flood of letters to the editor distracted from the overall purpose of the march: to protest gendered violence and call positive, supportive attention to the issue. The backlash twisted the intentions of organizers and instead of creating feelings of community and safety, resistance divided the

surrounding community and created feelings of resentment towards organizers and attendees. Although not as extensive as in Cambridge and Iowa City, by addressing the divisive topic of anti-pornography and basing their Take Back the Night organizing around it, the conflict in San Francisco distracted from the general goal of Take Back the Night. Organizers had to address this controversy and focus on mediating the relationship between the anti-pornography movement and anti-violence motivations, rather than solely highlighting the issue of gendered violence. Although the roots of conflict differed by location, conflicts experienced by organizers with other community groups and the surrounding community distracted from the goal of Take Back the Night and the intended messages of organizers.

### **Conclusion**

*“The truth is that we have to take back the night every night,  
or the night will never be ours.”<sup>83</sup>*

A woman stands in front of a crowd and tells them about her experience with gendered violence. Whether it’s a partner who beat her, a group of shouting men who followed her home, or a close friend who raped her after a party, the effect is the same. Those gathered at Take Back the Night surround her with support and shield her from shame. Organizers center the voices of those they deem most important, discouraging and blocking out those they see as unsuitable; as a result, they both defend attendees from degradation and limit their own goals. After hearing testimonies, the crowd gets angry. They get angry at a society that allows gendered violence to continue and supports it through the media and pornography. Despite the protections of so many other rights, women do not have the right to be in public or private without being subjected to gendered violence. They march down the streets where they usually run, trying to get home as

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<sup>83</sup> Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography*, 291.

fast as possible, and instead protest their daily reality. They join together and take back their streets and night.

Women at Take Back the Night saw marching and sharing testimony with each other as a way to affirm their seemingly universal experiences of gendered violence and protest a society that they saw as supporting, allowing, or ignoring this issue. Although experiences of gendered violence are not universal, Take Back the Night organizers were primarily White, middle-class cisgender women who saw them as such. These organizers limited themselves by focusing on a binary view of gendered violence, but they also created feelings of safety, community, and strength for many women during this time. Organizers created spaces for the expression of rage and the beginning of healing and change. Despite the feminist achievements of the previous decade, organizers were not confident in the legal and criminal systems' ability to prevent gendered violence or promote accountability for male perpetrators of gendered violence. Therefore, they felt a need to take back the night, showing their communities and attendees that women were strong together and willing to fight back against gendered violence.

Organizers in San Francisco, Cambridge, and Iowa City were motivated to take back the night for various reasons, including the number of attacks experienced in their communities, related publicity, and the resulting feelings of being unsafe, and their opposition to violence in pornography and media. They were motivated by both the large-scale issue of gendered violence, and local, context-specific events. Organizers dealt with many conflicts within their organizing groups, with their communities, and with other community groups. San Francisco Take Back the Night organizers acknowledged controversy surrounding feminist anti-pornography views. In Cambridge, organizers struggled with the question of including men, while community groups objected to their elitist attitudes and perceived inhospitality towards women of color. In Iowa City, the exclusion of men was discussed by organizers and ultimately resulted in intense

backlash and controversy from the surrounding Iowa City community. Ultimately, the meaning of Take Back the Night, to create community and strength for women who were tired of experiencing and fearing gendered violence, was influenced negatively by conflict in all three locations.

Research on Take Back the Night and its roots, limitations, and purpose is significant to the study of the women's rights movement, anti-violence movement, and anti-pornography movement. The anti-pornography movement is often ignored or omitted in the history of feminist movements and protests, and documents on Take Back the Night show its pervasive influence. Future research should expand geographically, further examining the local histories of Take Back the Night. Additionally, a deeper consideration of conflicts would contribute to a fuller understanding of how Take Back the Night was situated within other social justice movements and the broader time period. Reviewing additional media sources for locations where organizers did not save newspaper clippings themselves could illuminate the surrounding community's perception of and potential conflicts with Take Back the Night.

The messages, complexities, and motivations of Take Back the Night are still relevant today. Historical memory of Take Back the Night serves as a reminder for present day organizers of the long history of activism, providing lessons on the importance of intentional inclusion and evidence of the repetitive nature of backlash to organizing. Today's Take Back the Night organizers, and perhaps those who dismiss the issues it emphasizes, can learn from the precedent of this protest. Throughout my experiences working in violence prevention, those who dismiss and ignore the issue of gendered violence today often reference the progress made by feminists and anti-violence activists since the era discussed in this thesis. To an extent, this is true. Today, resources for survivors are more widely available and supported, definitions of victimhood and victimization are more expansive and inclusive, and the general attitude towards survivors is less

shameful and stigmatized. Norms surrounding this problem have changed. However, norms continually change, and gendered violence remains a pervasive issue. There has been a resurgence of the glorification of “alpha male” attitudes and toxic masculinities, as shown through media and the rise of male figures who support and glorify these ideologies that contribute to incidents of gendered violence.

Gendered violence is still underreported and perpetrators are not held accountable. According to the most recent Speak Out Iowa Survey provided by the University of Iowa, about one in four women-identified students reported experiencing sexual violence *since they enrolled at the university*. Transgender and gender nonconforming students report similarly heightened rates compared to men-identified students’ reported rates of sexual violence. Students at the University of Iowa also report experiences of stalking and intimate partner violence, with women and TGNC students reporting higher rates than men.<sup>84</sup> Nationally, every 68 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted.<sup>85</sup> On the streets, in homes, in churches, in schools, and in our correctional system, people still experience the unacceptable. Despite the progress made since the 1970s, the threat of sexual and gendered violence continues.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, Take Back the Night has expanded and aimed to be more inclusive, now operating under a broader understanding of sexual and gendered violence. At the University of Iowa, Take Back the Night is open to all individuals, regardless of gender identity, with the understanding that while some communities might disproportionately experience harm, any individual can experience sexual violence. Take Back the Night is also open to all individuals regardless of gender identity because today’s organizers view sexual assault as a public health issue and recognize the importance of community-wide responses to community

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<sup>84</sup> University of Iowa, Speak Out Iowa 2021 Survey, 2021, 62-72.

<sup>85</sup> “Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics,” RAINN, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>.

problems. This inclusion is crucial for the messages and goals of Take Back the Night, rather than inconsistent as believed by organizers in the past. Without educating on consent, boundaries, and power dynamics, and encouraging *everyone* to be involved in violence prevention efforts, our society will not eliminate sexual violence.

In recent years, Take Back the Night has shifted from loud, angry protests to more somber events dedicated to supporting and remembering those who have experienced sexual or gendered violence. Perhaps this shift illustrates the changing mindset of current organizers. Have today's organizers released the expectation of a society free of gendered and sexual violence? Or have they taken notes from earlier organizers and chosen to focus on community, safety, and healing by protesting in a gentler way and respectfully remembering the testimony that came before them? Regardless of the motivations of current organizers, the precedent of Take Back the Night demonstrates the necessity of community. Without societal support and the unification of brothers and sisters, there will not be an end to sexual and gendered violence. Today's generation, and the next, must learn from the limitations and successes of the Take Back the Night organizers of the 1970s and 1980s. Let us continuously affirm everyone's right to exist as their freest and truest self in public, without jeopardization of their safety, by taking back the night together.

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Figure 6: Anna Behrens and Abby McKenna at Take Back the Night, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Iowa City, Iowa.