San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR) – Response to Virtual Town Hall Questions

San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR) appreciates this opportunity to respond in writing to the DOSW Virtual Townhall Panel Questions regarding sexual violence during the time of COVID-19.

Briefly describe the work or your organization/agency. Who are your members/participants/clients?
San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR) is a community-based, anti-sexual assault, social justice organization founded in 1973 and serving San Francisco City & County. We provide support to sexual assault survivors, their families, and communities, and use education and community organizing as tools of prevention. We believe that ending all forms of oppression is integral to ending sexual assault and challenge oppression within our organization and communities. We are women of color-led and prioritize working with and for communities facing multiple forms of violence and oppression.

While SFWAR programs are designed to meet the needs of all sexual assault survivors/communities, we constantly assess our ability to effectively address the needs of traditionally underserved groups and those most vulnerable to sexual violence, including girls and young women; women of color; immigrant women; individuals with disabilities; those who are homeless/marginally housed; sex workers; incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women; LGBTQ and gender non-conforming communities.

What were the big issues in your work prior to COVID-19, and what has changed since the pandemic? What services are available now, how have they been shifted?

Many survivors of sexual violence are unable to truly address the trauma of their assault(s) until they are able to meet their basic needs (i.e. for food, clothing, and housing) and have achieved some level of economic stability. Therefore, it is likely not at all surprising safe and affordable housing and real economic opportunities that provide a living wage for individuals and families remain significant issues in our work. In addition, the Trump administration's commitment to demonizing immigrants of color, especially those of Latin descent; denying communities access to affordable healthcare, including draconian attacks on women's reproductive healthcare; fueling and condoning violence against communities of color; and rolling-back Title IX protections are some of the issues that greatly impact survivors seeking SFWAR services.

A major change to our work since the mandatory shelter in place order issued by the City and County of San Francisco to contain the spread of COVID-19 is the closure of the SFWAR Office at least through May 31st. We continue to provide crisis intervention, advocacy, counseling, information, and referrals via phone and/or through online platforms during this time. For immediate crisis support, please call the SFWAR 24-Hour Crisis Line at (415) 647-7273 (RAPE). For advocacy and/or counseling, please email sa2@sfwar.org or call (415) 861-2024 ext. 304 and leave a message. For information about sexual assault prevention education training and workshops, please email dci@sfwar.org call (415) 861-2024 ext. 308.
What challenges are you facing?
Quickly moving all direct services to be remote (i.e. via phone or online), along with a dwindling volunteer pool of certified rape crisis counselors - as many volunteers currently do not have the capacity to volunteer in the context of this pandemic are challenges SFWAR is navigating. Moreover, it is unclear when we will be able to hold another in-person volunteer training to certify new rape crisis counselors. In addition, moving sexual assault prevention education work to be remote is a true challenge. Also, while government contracts through this fiscal year have been guaranteed (many thanks to the SF Department on the Status of Women & the California Office of Emergency Services), it is unclear what agency funding will be in the new fiscal year. We expect foundation funding to plummet, as may funding from individual donors.

Finally, while we very much look forward to re-opening the SFWAR office and providing in-person services again, we want to do so responsibly, so, at least for a time, we expect to reduce the number of staff in the office at any given time to mitigate risk of virus transmission.

COVID-19 has highlighted the system failures and the already existing inequalities in our society (e.g. access to health insurance, housing, food, mental health services and other resources). How have you seen this in your work with survivors of sexual and interpersonal violence? What are the extra barriers that survivors face during the Shelter in Place?
COVID-19 has further exacerbated the trauma associated with sexual violence, especially for communities facing multiple forms of violence and oppression. For example, immigrant survivors who are limited English proficient often significantly benefit from in-person advocacy and accompaniment when making a police report, interfacing with law enforcement, and/or navigating other social systems. Of course, due to the mandatory shelter-in-place order to stem the spread of COVID-19, SFWAR is currently unable to provide in-person medical, criminal legal, and/or social service advocacy/accompaniment.

In addition, during this time of immense economic instability, low-income survivors often recognize they have no viable option, but to continue working in an environment where they are experiencing sexual harassment/violence for fear of losing valuable employment that is severely circumscribed at this particular time. Not to mention, low-income survivors express feeling they have no real choice, but to continue working in environments where they fear they may contract COVID-19, as they are not being adequately protected from the virus by their employers.

And, as has been frequently recognized, the Shelter in Place Order has resulted in survivors being forced to shelter in households/accommodations with their perpetrators and/or with abusers.

SFWAR absolutely recognizes reporting a sexual assault to law enforcement may be something a survivor decides not to do and SFWAR remains committed to letting survivors make their own decisions about how they address the violence they have experienced. At the same time, SFWAR has worked toward addressing barriers associated with reporting. In 2017, with the
support of Samara Marion of the SF Department for Police Accountability, SFWAR worked with SFPD Assistant Chief Redmond to develop a protocol where police officers can be dispatched to the SFWAR office to take a survivor's report. A police report being taken at the SFWAR Office with a SFWAR Survivor Advocate present to support the process can make a tremendous difference. Of course, with the SFWAR office closure, we are now unable to offer that support.

In addition, SFWAR is committed to supporting all survivors of sexual violence whether they have experienced interpersonal violence, state violence, or both. For that reason, we have very significant concerns for incarcerated survivors during this time that COVID-19 is spreading through jails, prisons, and detention facilities, especially as family members and advocates are no longer able to enter these sites presumably to stem the spread of the virus.

Clearly, our inability to provide in-person advocacy/accompaniment for survivors (we are now providing medical accompaniment to survivors at ZSFG via phone too) and in-person counseling at this time has been detrimental for many survivors. In addition, as we have moved our services to be offered via phone and/or through online platforms, the issue of the digital divide looms even larger. Pre-COVID-19 many survivors we work with did not have consistent cell phone service or access to computers. Now the digital divide is even more pronounced, as libraries are closed where survivors might utilize computers to correspond and funds are even more restricted for individuals, as they must weigh paying for food, housing, or cell phone service.

What can we do to support survivors right now? SFWAR has attempted to quickly adapt to the new circumstances we are all facing. In addition, we have seen the SF Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) quickly adapt too. We acknowledge and appreciate SART members for working with SFWAR to revise our coordinated response to support survivors in a manner that prioritizes health and safety. Now, more than ever, it is important to listen to survivors, hear what they need, and work to implement responses that meet those needs.

This is a moment to reimagine a world we want and collectively build it together, what are the opportunities that this crisis provides us to build? Sexual assault intersects with every social justice issue. At SFWAR, we often say name a social problem or form of oppression (e.g. homelessness, poverty, police brutality, the prison industrial complex, the medical industrial complex, xenophobia, white-supremacy, ableism, transphobia, heteropatriarchy, etc.) and we can share how sexual assault thrives within its context. So, now more than ever, SFWAR feels it is important for those of us doing anti-sexual violence work to link with other social justice movements and support the work of those movements, while holding up the issue of sexual violence within the context of the social problems those movements address. We continue to maintain that the only way to end sexual violence, which is a part of SFWAR's agency mission, is to end oppression, since rape is a tool/weapon of oppression.
What is one thing that brings you hope right now?
The resilience of survivors gives us hope as do the many community partners we are humbled to have worked closely with over the decades, including Sins Invalid, Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project, Mission Neighborhood Resource Center, Women’s Community Clinic, Mujeres Unidas y Activas, El/La para TransLatinas, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, The Women’s Building, Young Asian Women Against Violence (a program of the Community Youth Center), Expect Respect SF, A Woman’s Place, Oasis for Girls, Young Women’s Freedom Center, just to name a few. Our sincerest apologies if we might have missed anyone!