

We need to include ending violence in our organising, or our movements will fail to build a better world. Rarohenga is an ideal that can inspire us to think beyond our messy realities where violence is thriving. It reminds us that the foundations of strong communities are connections and care. We can organise safer, nurturing, and powerful movements. Learning about violence and growing connection and care in our movements can help us rebuild our communities to be more like Rarohenga—where we are not reproducing violence and responding to it is simpler.

Ngā Mahi o Rarohenga: Organising Well Means Organising to End Violence

KIM McBREEN

I believe that by including ending violence in any work we do, we will make our organising better and our movements safer, stronger, and more resilient.¹

Our movements are only as strong as the relationships that hold us together. Violence destroys relationships and trust. Whatever we are doing to make lives better, we should include ending violence in our organising. Lots of us know about and avoid organisations with a reputation for ignoring violence or for protecting people causing harm from any consequences. I've seen movements fall apart because of violence and our failures to deal with it. It undermines everything. If we aren't trying to make our own movements safer, more just and nurturing, what future do we think we'll build?

We can do better, and many organisers are. This piece aims to support that work. It begins by asking what we learn about ending violence from the ideal community of Rarohenga.

1 He Ara Mataora, <https://www.mataora.wananga.com/>, has tools and information if you are looking for support to deal with violence happening now.

A woman's family supports her to live free from violence

One day some young women from Rarohenga visited Te Ao Tūroa on their big OE. The first place they got to they met a guy called Mataora; they stopped and spent time with him. One of the women, Niwareka, was keen on him and he liked her too.

When her friends were ready to move on, Niwareka wasn't. She decided to stay and get to know Mataora better. It was pretty intense. She was living with him and she didn't know anyone else. When Mataora's older brother started hanging around, Niwareka didn't think anything of it—she was a long way from home and she missed her whānau. It was a relief to have someone else to spend time with.

But Mataora didn't know what to do with himself—he was jealous and insulted that his brother would move in on his girlfriend. He wanted to fight him, but he knew he'd lose and then his brother would get Niwareka. So instead he took all those feelings out on her. He beat her.

Niwareka was shocked, upset, and angry. Why would he hurt her? There was no excuse, and she didn't wait for one.

She left.

She didn't flee from him. She wasn't scared or ashamed. She just left him. Where she came from, people didn't take their feelings out on each other.

Niwareka went home. Her action stopped Mataora's violence.

The first thing Niwareka did when she got home was to visit her kuia, Hine-nui-te-Pō, who made sure Niwareka knew she was right to come home. Niwareka went back to her mahi as a weaver. Her people gathered around her and made sure she was okay.

Back in Te Ao Tūroa, Mataora felt sorry for himself. He missed Niwareka. He was lonely and ashamed; he needed her back. He put on his best clothes and painted his face, thinking if her people saw his mana they would give her to him. Mataora followed Niwareka to Rarohenga.

Mataora made a fool of himself straight away. He ran into a group where a young guy was getting tā moko, and he told the artist he was doing

it wrong. The artist's name was Uetonga. Uetonga touched the thick paint on Mataora's face, and it came off.

Mataora was embarrassed and angry. Instead of recognising his mana, people were laughing at him. He wanted to fight Uetonga.

Uetonga felt for this strange young man. Was he okay? Could Uetonga help him? After talking with him, Uetonga offered to give him a proper moko.

As the chisel cut his face, Mataora chanted Niwareka's name. It turned out that Uetonga was Niwareka's father.

When Mataora saw Niwareka again, he apologised and begged her to take him back.

Niwareka took him at face value because that's who she was; why would he come all this way if he wasn't really sorry? They got back together and stayed in Rarohenga.

Niwareka kept weaving and spending time with her whānau and friends. She was happy and secure. Her father and her brother Tauwehe looked after Mataora, showing him how to be a better person. He was stoked, their attention made him feel important.

But it wasn't long before he got tired of being in Niwareka's world, living under the shadow of her whānau. He was homesick. He asked her to go back to Te Ao Tūroa with him.

Niwareka wasn't keen. He hadn't let her build a life there before.

Mataora promised it would be different this time. Again, Niwareka believed him—she wanted it to be true. And she could always come home again. She agreed.

Niwareka's whānau weren't happy. Her father and her brother told Mataora what they thought—he had hurt and betrayed Niwareka. They didn't want her living in fear of his violence. They didn't want her living where people didn't look out for each other.

Again, Mataora was ashamed. But this time he owned it, he acknowledged what he'd done. Mataora told them he was different now. He swore he would follow what they'd taught him, even at home without them to support him.

Mataora and Niwareka stayed in Rarohenga until she finished her weaving. When her whānau were satisfied that Mataora was safe and worthy of her, they presented the couple with taonga and reminded Mataora, ‘Whāia ngā mahi o Rarohenga’. The taonga, including the tā moko that he wore and the tāniko that Niwareka had woven, represent Mataora’s commitment to follow the tikanga of Rarohenga.

Niwareka and Mataora went back to Te Ao Tūroa taking the tikanga of Rarohenga with them.

They lived good and meaningful lives.

Ending violence

This is an old and important story, often told now as the origin story of tā moko, neglecting the other tikanga that Niwareka and Mataora brought to te ao mārama (including tāniko). The story tells us what our tūpuna thought of relationship violence, and what we need to do to keep people safe. It is still relevant to violence in relationships, and helps us with the two tasks of ending violence: building a culture where violence can’t thrive (sometimes called transformative justice) and responding to violence when it happens (community accountability). It’s a great example for thinking about the foundations of strong communities, organisations, and movements.

A culture where violence can’t thrive

The story of Niwareka and Mataora teaches us that the key to ending violence is building a culture of care and connection. Rarohenga is the ideal, with a culture that makes everyone safer. Te Ao Tūroa is our messy reality where people aren’t supported by their community.

In Te Ao Tūroa, Mataora didn’t learn to manage his emotions safely. Mataora blamed his brother and Niwareka for his jealousy, and he took his feelings out on Niwareka because she had no-one on her side. She was isolated, so he felt safe hurting her with no-one to stop or judge him. His jealousy was more important to him than Niwareka’s mana and safety.

In Rarohenga, Niwareka grew up to know her worth and mana, and

she expected people to treat each other well. That didn't stop her from being attacked in Te Ao Tūroa, but it meant she didn't accept it, she knew it was wrong. That boundary made her safer.

The love and care Niwareka had growing up meant that, when Mataora attacked her, she also had options, she didn't feel trapped. She went home knowing it was somewhere safe where she would be supported. No-one would blame her, shame her, or send her back to an abusive relationship.

When Niwareka went back to Rarohenga, her whānau got involved but they didn't do anything that looked like an intervention. As soon as she got home, they supported Niwareka, reinforcing her strengths, mana, and wairua. They didn't try to control her, or limit her choices, or tell her what to do. They checked on her and made sure she felt valued and cared for.

As soon as Mataora arrived, Niwareka's whānau supported him too, not only because they are kind, and not only for Mataora's benefit. It made Niwareka safer. They could see that he cared what men thought of him, so the men of her whānau built relationships with him. They became role models. Those connections helped him choose to grow up and become safe. They kept him choosing to work on himself instead of sliding back into selfish, dangerous attitudes and behaviour.

Niwareka's whānau focused on her long-term safety and good life. Some of them might have wanted to punish Mataora, I imagine a lot of venting about him happened in private. Others might have felt sympathetic to him. Whatever they felt about Mataora hurting Niwareka, they worked together without getting distracted or undermining each other. No-one added to the violence and trauma, and that meant there was none of the messiness that causes infighting and chaos.

It was only when Niwareka and Mataora decided to go back to Te Ao Tūroa that her whānau confronted Mataora. Even then, they stayed focused on her safety and happiness.

Responding to violence when it happens

When I think of times I've responded to violence, it's nothing like the Rarohenga story. It's all stress and frustration. Long meetings, drama

spinning out in every direction. Lots of people demanding different things. All of it feeling like we're making things worse. The ones who were hurt, and often the person who hurt them, feeling abandoned. Trying to work out what is going on and how to look after themselves by themselves—maybe not at the start, but eventually. Often feeling guilty and blamed for tearing apart the community.

We burn ourselves out trying to do the right thing, and we don't even manage to support the people involved.

What has gone wrong?

Two hundred years of colonisation and trauma doesn't bring out the best in everyone.

Rarohenga shows how the tikanga of whānau can take away opportunities for violence and make it easier to respond when violence happens. Whānau and tikanga have been attacked for 200 years. Our tikanga and understandings of relationships and community are being replaced by a culture of punishment and control.

All of this affects our connectedness and ability to care, and that makes violence more likely. To escape the cycle of trauma and violence, we need to rebuild bubbles of care and connection.

bell hooks said, 'There can be no love without justice.' How can we be kind when we are holding so much pain and rage? How can we be generous under generations of trauma? When we see so much injustice on the daily?

But we need all the love we can pull together if we are to create a just world.

Care and connection, with generosity and boundaries. Keep checking on safety and be ready to act. The principles we learn from Rarohenga can help us respond to real-life abuse and violence without creating more trauma.

For example, what if Niwareka didn't want anything to do with Mataora, but Mataora wanted to stay and learn from her father? Two people in the same whānau or community, one hurts the other, the person who was hurt wants them out of their life, the person who caused harm wants to keep all their relationships and go to all the places and gatherings. Just by

showing up, they cause more harm and isolate the person they hurt. How do we manage that messiness when lives are overlapping and entangled?

What if Mataora didn't see anything wrong with his behaviour, and wasn't interested in changing?

What if some of Niwareka's people believed Mataora's excuses and distractions?

What if some of them got angry at Niwareka for bringing this into their lives?

What if Niwareka had nowhere to go?

What if Niwareka's father sent Mataora home, or attacked him?

What if there were police or prisons?

So many ways this story could get more complicated or go wrong, and we've seen them all.

First we need to be clear on what we hope to do by getting involved. From there we can ask, can we do it in a way that supports both the person who was hurt and the person who hurt them? It might not be possible, but we will learn about the situation by brainstorming things we might do, and then thinking through the reality of doing them.

For example, if Niwareka wants to live her life without seeing Mataora, we do our best to support that. We're more likely to succeed if Mataora feels supported and cared for. In the short term, our relationships with Mataora can help him choose to stay away from Niwareka; and in the longer term, they can encourage him towards real accountability and change.

Imagine Mataora wants to go to a party that Niwareka might go to (as so often happens). What if we give Mataora a different party? A few people who help him manage his feelings of shame, fear of rejection, loneliness, anger, whatever is leading him to selfish, abusive decisions. Spend time with him and keep him away from the real party so the problem doesn't blow up.

If possible, support and care for Mataora. It might feel like rewarding Mataora for bad behaviour, but we aren't letting him off the hook—we are supporting Mataora to do less harm, we want Mataora to make better choices. Supporting the person who caused harm can be the most stressful,

thankless job of an intervention. It can go on for years. And it can have a huge effect on how the intervention goes, both in the short and long term.

Niwareka might resent any support Mataora gets, but she is less likely to if she is well supported too.

Support and care for Niwareka. Make sure she knows everything she needs to know. If Mataora might be somewhere she wants to go, tell her so she can make good choices. If you know Mataora won't go to the party, tell her so she can relax and enjoy it. Be reliable. Help her feel safe and valued. Help her make good decisions.

It's easy to say all this, and hard to do in practice.

The first few days or weeks will be intense while everyone works out what's happening and what's expected of them. Stories will change. Everyone will be unreasonable at times, testing boundaries and commitments. Take it slow, focus on safety, look after each other.

If we do the early part of responding to violence well, we might lessen the messiness and chaos, and all the extra pain and distrust they bring. If we make it through this crucial, stressful time, things will settle, and we will get a sense of the long-term work. The most important things are safety, listening to the person who was hurt, caring for each other and our relationships, and reflecting on and learning from what is happening.

And still it might feel awful. There are no simple success stories and there is no endpoint. It is a process of learning better relationships and supporting each other towards better choices.

Organising for ending violence—can we be more like Rarohenga?

Rarohenga shows us that the strategies that take away opportunities for violence also make it easier to respond to violence when it happens.

Rarohenga is built on aspirations. When we focus on living well, violence can't get a foothold—working together, expecting the best of each other, practicing safe boundaries, supporting growth, building and strengthening connections, caring for all. When people fall down, they are helped back up.

When we are being hurt, we need people we trust to check in with. Someone who will listen and tell us we don't deserve to be hurt, without taking over or judging us. Someone who will ask what we need and help us work it out if we don't know. Niwareka had this in Rarohenga.

When we are hurting someone else, we need people we trust to check in with. Someone who will listen without rejecting us, and without letting us off the hook. Someone who will support us to be better and keep reminding us what we need to do, even when we think we've done enough. Niwareka's whānau became those people for Mataora.

Who are those people for you?

How do we build this into our lives and organising? How do we grow a culture where people who don't have anyone they trust still have people when they need them?

This is what we need to rebuild.

The two most powerful strategies to end violence are education and connection. Learning about violence and growing a shared language for talking about it helps us understand how violence works in our relationships and those of the people we care about. Ending isolation by re-growing communities with connection and care takes away the opportunity for violence and helps us respond without causing more harm.

We can break this down further into four actions that might shift our attention and culture.

1. If we commit to learning together about violence, safety, and support, we will grow a shared language and understanding. This will make it easier to talk with each other, and grow our confidence to support people.
2. If we take the time to check in with people, and to talk about real struggles we have, we invite others to do the same for us and each other. It doesn't have to be every day, but it should be something we do. The more organisational or social power we have, the more important it is for people to see us being supportive and vulnerable.
3. If we each strengthen our support, we will all be stronger. Who

would you go to when you're failing, ashamed, humiliated, not coping? Who would come to you when they're failing? It doesn't need to be many people, even two or three is better than no-one. The Bay Area Transformative Justice Pod Mapping worksheet is a good place to start.

4. If we organise ourselves in ways that share power and leadership, everyone gets to experience success and control. This is something we can do in all our networks. Notice who is making decisions and who is following them, and find ways to share those roles so that everyone can practice solving problems, asking for what we want and listening to what others want.

It will be easier if we can find people to work with, so that we can talk about all this and what to do. We can learn from each other, try different things, and get better at it. Some of these we can do anywhere—in our organising, in our whānau, workplaces, sports clubs, churches, with our friends. Some will only make sense with some people.

Traps to avoid

We know interpersonal violence is common and most of us are living with it. But when it happens, it is always a total surprise we didn't see coming. Why are we unprepared? What are we doing that takes us further from Rarohenga?

Violence is both serious and common, which makes it hard to see. We don't pay enough attention to real violence in our lives, where we could make a difference, and we pay too much attention to shutting out potential violence. Signs that we are ignoring the violence in our lives are when we hear or say things like, 'That's nothing, my partner/parent/child does much worse . . . ' or, 'If it was really bad, they'd leave', or, 'It takes two to tango'. Signs that we are focusing too much on potential violence are when our strategies try to keep violence outside, like 'zero tolerance' or 'violence-free' policies. We won't end violence if we can't or won't see it. And we won't end violence by trying to shut it out; that only makes it harder to ask for help.

We need to make it easier to see violence and ask for help.

‘Strong’ or ‘hard’ approaches to violence make us feel powerful and in control, but they don’t make violence go away. Will I ask for help with my violence if I risk losing everything I care about? Will I speak up if I see someone I care about or rely upon hurting someone? If people finding out about my partner’s, parent’s, or child’s violence means they lose their job, friends, or housing, or that I won’t be able to see them, where can I get help?

Having a group of experts who tell us what to do and a process to stick to makes us feel safer, but they also make us helpless. If someone always takes control, how do we get better at seeing what’s happening, working out what we need, and supporting each other? And what do we do when they get it wrong?

Strengthening leaders or hierarchies is familiar and might feel safe, but it doesn’t make us safer. For example, some people argue that to end violence against women, men need to ‘man up’ and take their place at the head of the family. Have women been safer when the state has supported men to have even more power over women and children? That’s not how power and violence work. Violence thrives where people have power over others, but we hear less about it because there’s nowhere to go for help.

Supporting the person who was hurt is obvious, and still we often don’t. Organised responses to violence often use ideas like ‘natural justice’ and ‘burdens of proof’ as excuses for marginalising the person who was hurt and protecting the person who hurt them. It means we don’t have to do anything until we’ve heard both sides and the person who was hurt has proven their story. If we want to end violence, we need to listen to, believe, and support people hurt by violence.

Natural justice and burdens of proof make some sense if our only responses to violence are harsh, righteous, and punitive. But those responses are more about making us feel powerful and in control than about ending violence or growing safety. Rarohenga shows we can do better.

Whāia ngā mahi o Rarohenga

The story of Niwareka and Mataora tells us that a strong and nurturing community leads to less violence and makes responding to that violence simpler.

Unfortunately, it doesn't mean growing those communities will be easy.

Colonisation has attacked the tikanga that make our communities strong, and at the same time caused pain and trauma for generations. That violence has allowed interpersonal violence to thrive and made us dependent on controlling and violent solutions to feel safe.

To make our movements strong and nurturing communities, we need to re-normalise tikanga of care and connection. And we need to respond to both historical and ongoing violence in ways that don't create more trauma and chaos.

We won't get there with just positive thinking, values and kaupapa, or constitutional documents, no matter how well we write them. It will take intention, action, reflection, and faith.

I hope this story of Niwareka and Mataora can help.

Is there anything about Rarohenga we'd like to reproduce in our organising?

What would that look like?

What do we need to change to make it work—in ourselves and our organising?

What is scary about this?

Is it worth trying anyway?

If we follow the example of Rarohenga, we can grow movements that are safer. We might even grow movements that are nurturing and inspiring. Real communities.

He ūkaipō.

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Whose Futures?

Many have become accustomed to speaking of what comes next in terms of a singular ‘future’. Such accounts tend to operate within the narrow confines of colonial capitalism and assume continued economic growth. But there is no ‘one’ future; there are many. As the contributions to this book attest, irreconcilable and interrelated futures are already playing out in the present.

This collection brings together voices and perspectives from Aotearoa New Zealand to interrogate whose lives are at stake, whose voices and visions count, and what elements are at play in the unfolding of certain futures over others. Authors highlight the need to be attentive to how various social technologies and institutions invite certain ways of being, thinking and acting and exclude others. In doing so, they offer a series of reflections on futures ‘from below’, in order to amplify voices and fight for alternatives.

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