

SAFE CONVERSATIONS®: CONTRIBUTING TO GLOBAL FEMINISM

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I: Safe Conversations and Its Potential Relationship to Global Feminism

Safe Conversations is a dialogue process that helps people learn a new way to talk. The relational sciences are teachable for first time in history due to the breakthroughs in the neurosciences in 1990's. Safe Conversations helps people maintain connection while accepting difference. With this new development comes the promise of helping people build healthier connections and lasting relationships with spouses, partners, friends, and colleagues, among others. Safe Conversations is well poised to contribute to global feminism.

II: Global Feminism Today

Based on my understanding, global feminism is *“resistance to sexist oppression, and the pursuit of equality and justice for people of all genders worldwide.”*

This definition aims to identify both the problem (sexist oppression) and the solution (equality and justice), while remaining suitably open-ended in a way that recognizes that oppression as well as equality/justice may look different in various cultural contexts. The open-endedness of this definition is also important in order to avoid falling into the traps of imperialist, missionary feminism, that is, feminism that idealizes Western cultural forms, assuming they are the endpoint of women's liberation.ⁱ One way that idealization of Western cultural norms harms women around the world, is that it sees them primarily as autonomous individuals rather than as relational beings.ⁱⁱ

Safe Conversations does not seek to impose a Western vision of liberation on women of other cultures. In fact, this conversational process allows women to, not only be autonomous individuals, but also to remain connected to their spouses, their families, and their communities. This makes it a useful tool for pursuing gender justice in a way that does not pit women against men or disconnect them from their group identities.

III: Safe Conversations as a Tool for Social Transformation

Safe Conversations is a tool that can help us create a culture of equal partnership between men and women. It helps equalize power. As a dialogue process, it allows people to enter into meaningful and authentic conversations that strengthen and equalize relationships. It does this by creating a conversational structure that:

- Allows partners to stay connected in conversation, while accepting difference
- Helps people shift from judgement to curiosity
- Cultivates empathy

As Niobe Way and Joseph Nelson observe “the science of human connection consistently reveals that it is our stereotypes of one another, and our lack of curiosity in each other, that lead us to believe we have nothing to learn from one another.”ⁱⁱⁱ By

creating an atmosphere of empathy, curiosity, and understanding, Safe Conversations helps to dissolve stereotypes and equalize power between partners.

Safe Conversations also helps us think *holistically* about women's empowerment.^{iv} Equality and justice for women doesn't just mean economic equality or equal rights or equal political power; it means all these things and more. One thing that is missing from the above list is *relationships*. Women want equality, not just in the political or economic sphere, but in their homes, their families, and their friendships. Safe Conversations completes this relational aspect of women's lives by providing a pathway towards a healthy relational life.

IV: Responding to a Global Crisis of Connection

In 1982, Carol Gilligan published *In a Different Voice*, arguing that an ethic of care and responsibility should be understood as a fully developed form of moral reasoning. The book became iconic for challenging a dominant paradigm in mental health that viewed autonomy and individuation as the highest stage of moral development. More recently, Gilligan has continued her work on human relationality by collaborating on an edited volume titled *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions*. The book gathers together a range of essays devoted to identifying, analyzing, and rectifying the titular crisis. The crisis of connection and its effects are, in many ways, gendered, classed, sexualized, and racialized. Traits that are most traditionally associated with straight white males (autonomy, rationality) are valued over those associated with groups who don't fit in this category (relationality, emotional).^v

The crisis of connection is experienced globally; it is not confined to any one country. Patterns of increasing isolation can be found in countries around the world and rates of depression and anxiety disorders have increased internationally. However, such disorders are more prevalent in western societies like the U.S., which might suggest "that societies that privilege individualism over relationships are more at risk for a crisis of connection."^{vi}

Given the way this crisis affects people of different identities and contexts in diverse but equally devastating ways, it should be a goal of intersectional feminism to restore connection and healthy relationships among human beings in all contexts.

Safe Conversations provides a valuable tool for fostering connections. By empowering people to talk without criticism, listen without judgement, and connect beyond differences, the Safe Conversations process can help build a culture of connection.

V: Power and Relationality

In her influential book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler argues that there are two basic models of human society: dominator and partnership. Each model is distinguished by the way it distributes power in society. In the dominator model, certain groups (often white men, in our current time) hold all the power and use it to subdue

and control other groups (women, people of color, etc.). In a partnership model, power is more equally distributed; no single group dominates another.^{vii}

These two models also reflect two separate ways of *defining* power. The domination model values power as a means of control and oppression. Power is understood as “power over” others. The partnership model understands power as “power with” others. Safe Conversations embraces a “power with” or shared power model of human relationship teaching people a new way to talk. By modeling this distribution of power, Safe Conversations provides a powerful tool for the creation of a partnership culture.

Eisler also notes that the way people structure the relationship between the male and female halves of humanity impacts the structure of society as a whole. If relationships between men and women are characterized by the domination of one gender by the other, the society as a whole reflects a domination mindset. Thus, equalizing power between men and women is critical to building a partnership society.

VI: Nomi Network: An Example

The Nomi Network, a non-profit working to combat human trafficking in India and Cambodia, is an example of an organization using Safe Conversations as part of a holistic approach to women’s empowerment. Nomi helps women and adolescent girls become economically self-sufficient and teaches them to advocate for their rights. As the women began to establish economic freedom and an identity outside of the home, it disrupted traditional gender norms, creating stress within the family. The women’s husbands responded to their wives’ newly established economic freedom with skepticism and in some cases, physical and verbal violence. The Nomi Network decided to integrate Safe Conversations into their rural development curriculum, which allows the women to form stronger bonds with their husbands and male family members by giving families the tools to discuss the changes taking place within the home in a safe and connecting way.

VII: Safe Conversations Initiatives Around the World

Harville and I came to Dallas some years ago to explore distributing Safe Conversations in the form of a train the trainer program. Since then, people from 37 states in the U.S., and from 28 countries have been trained. We know from this that this work has meaning to people throughout the world. Specific examples of people who have come for training, and are now sharing Safe Conversations in their local contexts are – Rosita Romero from the Dominican Women’s Development Center in New York City; Sunita Viswanath in her work with immigrant women through her organization, Sadhana; Phyllis Benjamin who has taken it to Bangalore, India; Hind El Jarrah, who is sharing it with Muslim families in Dallas and throughout North Texas. Recently, Pollyanna and Baldwin Barnes led a ten-day Safe Conversations event at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya with 3,000 students in attendance. They have been invited back again next year to continue to train and teach Safe Conversations in both South Africa and Kenya. Carol Dixon and Johanri Englebrecht have led workshops in rural districts of

South Africa, in Soweto township and KwaZulu-Natal. These eight trainees indicate the interest around the world in Safe Conversations, and its ability to create harmony and equality among populations everywhere. While some of this work is around social justice, some of it is around work in the domestic sphere. Teaching couples Safe Conversations in homes shifts them from a dominator-subordinator model of marriage to a partnership marriage. Eventually, Safe Conversations within homes and marriages erodes the patriarchy, one couple at a time. A Safe Conversations' home life gives someone working in the global feminist movement the kind of home that after a day of feminist activity, her conversations with her spouse and children will be mutually respectful.

VIII: Conclusion

Social change is never easy, and there is always push-back from those who would like to maintain the status quo. As the struggle for women's equality continues, we need tools like Safe Conversations to help people stay connected even when they deeply disagree. Meaningful change can only be sustained by building and maintaining relationships, bridging divisions, and building understanding across differences. Staying connected in this way *does not* mean accepting persistent inequality or letting people who oppose change go unchallenged. Instead, Safe Conversations provides a process whereby meaningful dialogue can occur. Rather than allow people to shut down and stop listening to each other, it creates a pathway to deeper understanding and connection that is itself transformative. This is the path towards a partnership culture in which everyone's voice is heard and valued and power is distributed equitably.

ⁱ We take the idea of using “resistance to sexist oppression” as a working definition of transnational feminism from Serene Khader, whose work seeks to chart a middle course between rejecting imperialist universalism and retreating into cultural relativism. Serene Khader *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2019.

ⁱⁱ There is much psychological research that suggests women particularly tend to think of morality relationally. Perhaps the most well-known example is Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. Gilligan challenged Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which posited justice (characterized by individuation, autonomy and self-sufficiency) as the highest stage of moral reasoning. Noting that Kohlberg had only studied only men, Gilligan used interviews with women to demonstrate that an ethic of care and responsibility (which is attentive the relational aspect of ethics) existed alongside an ethic of justice as a fully developed form of moral reasoning. Jean Baker Miller, founder of the Stone Center at Wellesley Center for women, also did significant work on human relationality and women's mental health. She, along with three other PhD's: Judith V. Jordan, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey created Relational-Cultural Therapy—where relationship and context, rather than individualism and isolation—was valued.

Thus, understanding women's empowerment in terms of autonomy and individual rights is not only an imposition of Western thinking, it may also be out of touch with the way women understand themselves and their actions. Of course, it is important to note that Gilligan and Stone's research was conducted in the United States and should not be assumed to apply universally across cultures. Gilligan, in particular, has been critiqued on this point (see for example, Carol B. Stacks, "The Culture of Gender: Women and Men of Color" *Signs* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1986), pp. 321-324), but she has also been clear that she never meant for her theory to be applied to women categorically. By focusing on women in her study, Gilligan uncovered another mode of moral reasoning that had been missed by previous studies of only (and primarily white) men. Rather than uncovering a way of reasoning exclusive to and universally characteristic of women, the main contribution of Gilligan's research is to reveal the shortcomings of assuming that any one group can stand in for all of humankind. Missionary feminism falls prey to this same shortcoming by assuming that Western values are the universal endpoint of women's liberation.

Overall, Safe Conversations' focus on relationality, though attentive to the work of Gilligan and others, does not stem from the assumption that women in particular are relationally driven, but rather derives from the recognition that *humans* as a whole are relational beings in need of connection (a conclusion that *The Crisis of Connection*, discussed in section VI, also supports).

iii "The Listening Project" in Way et al. *The Crisis of Connection*, 277.

iv Approaching women's empowerment holistically is particularly important when thinking globally since "empowerment" has become a popular buzzword in international development. In Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès' article, "Empowerment: the History of a Key concept in Contemporary Development Discourse" (*Revue Tiers Monde* 2009:4), she traces the way in which language of women's empowerment has been gradually co-opted by development agencies to indicate a largely individualized and depoliticized understanding of women's power that is often reduced to economics.

v Based on separate studies of adolescent girls and boys that are detailed in the volume, the editors observe that "boys and men are supposed to think and not feel and girls and women are supposed to feel and not think" (16). As a result, girls learn to keep their thoughts to themselves and men learn to keep their feelings to themselves, neither of which is conducive to forming authentic relationships. People of color, among others, must contend with additional stereotypes and cultural messages about who they are, or should be, that present further obstacles to connection. Niobe Way, et al. *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, Solutions*, (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

vi *Ibid.*, 30.

vii Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1987).