

Transformative Dialogue: Changing Power Dynamics Through Gender Reconciliation

Konyka Dunson

University of the District of Columbia

Ph.D. Student – Urban Leadership and Entrepreneurship

kdunson@udc.edu

Abstract

Gender and power remain challenging and complex dynamics across cultures, organizations, and the highest leadership levels. While societies have made significant progress in women's advancement, limiting social constructs around gender and gender-based violence persist. This reality calls for new approaches to confront limiting gender paradigms to create lasting social change. The positive impact of dialogue processes on transforming personal attitudes motivates the goal of this study—to develop a conceptual framework of dialogue as a driver of social change that shifts gender and power dynamics. The paper examines gender reconciliation, a dialogue process developed by the Satyana Institute called “Gender Equity and Reconciliation International” (GERI), which centers gender for dialogue and creates a space for women and men to examine their own experiences toward healing and transformation. The paper analyzes the impact of gender reconciliation through in-depth interviews of South African participants in a gender reconciliation process who later became GERI facilitators. The findings document significant personal change as participants encountered beliefs around gender and noted changed mindsets, impacts on their leadership, and becoming equipped to engage in transformative dialogue on gender equity. The findings form the basis of a new framework for how dialogue can generate social change: Dialogue, Awareness, Belief, Action, Society (DABAS). The study suggests that gender reconciliation provides a tool to uproot limiting and persistent social constructs and shift gender and power dynamics.

Keywords: Social Change, Transformative Dialogue, Gender Constructs, Gender-Based Violence, Gender Reconciliation

Word Count: 227

Introduction

Gender constructs, attitudes, and beliefs that damage and oppress women and men persist across time and cultures. However, this reality does not have to be unchallenged. Rooted in gendered beliefs, Gender-based violence (GBV), which is directed to a person because of sex or gender that inflicts “emotional, physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering...coercion and other deprivations of liberty,” is a global phenomenon and threat to women’s health (Dlamini, 2021, p.583; Leburu-Masigo & Kgadima, 2020). In 2020, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa described gender-based violence as the “second pandemic” where “violence is being unleashed on women and children with a brutality that defies comprehension” (Crux, 2020). Yet, he offered a stirring call to action that people can overcome this pandemic by taking personal responsibility and working together (Crux, 2020).

To move toward social change, personal actions of awareness and responsibility are essential. Dialogue, a critical tool for change, heightens personal and cultural awareness and impacts beliefs and paradigms around gender and violence (van Schalkwyk & Godobo-Madikizela, 2017). Yet, dialogue is only one aspect in a multi-faceted approach to influence social norms and reduce GBV that encompasses the law, economic systems, communities, cultural norms, beliefs, tribes, and families (Piedalue, Gilbertson, Alexeyeff & Klein, 2020). Therefore, dialogue is not a singular solution, rather a significant tool for change that impacts personal and collective consciousness.

Dialogue, affecting change group by group, is an intentional, facilitated “process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be

changed by what they learn” (Saunders, 1999, p. 82; Flint, 2019). Dialogue impacts an individual. Then, the impact of dialogue expands as new thoughts, ideas, and communications enter into relationships, and social groups and influence accepted norms, beliefs, and commonly held definitions of women and men (Cislaghi, Denny, Cissé, Gueye, Shrestha, B., Shrestha, P. N., Ferguson, Hughes, & Clark, 2019). Changes in personal awareness impact how individuals express personal agency and shift power dynamics between people. These changes in personal awareness, which impact culture, beliefs, and gender constructs, can be intentionally facilitated through dialogue. Considering how social problems such as GBV are often rooted in gender constructs, the gender reconciliation dialogue process offers a viable process to generate social solutions. This paper examines gender reconciliation as a tool for social change and examines the overarching question of how a dialogue process can lead to personal transformation that generates social change. Ultimately, the aim is to develop a framework for using dialogue to facilitate social change.

Motivation for Research

After participating in a Gender Equity and Reconciliation International (GERI) gender reconciliation workshop with men and women from all over the United States, the experience left a lasting impact. Reflecting on the experience as a researcher, I experienced a willingness to engage, reflect, and authentically share my truth in the presence of men and women whom I had just met. The motivating research question became: How can greater awareness of gender reconciliation benefit others worldwide? The need is overwhelmingly clear. In South Africa, for example, which has one of the highest rates of femicide globally, more than 50% of women experience partner violence (Adebayo, 2020). While social change is a collective endeavor, individuals encounter a social problem intimately, personally, and in cultural contexts. Through

individuals, conscious and unconscious behavior often recreates social norms and social problems in everyday interactions, relationships, and social institutions (Cislaghi et al., 2019; McLean, Heise & Stern, 2020; Marcus & Harper, 2014). Therefore, dialogue is a site to explore the personal awareness that collectively creates and can transform a social problem.

Transformative Dialogue as Process for Social Change

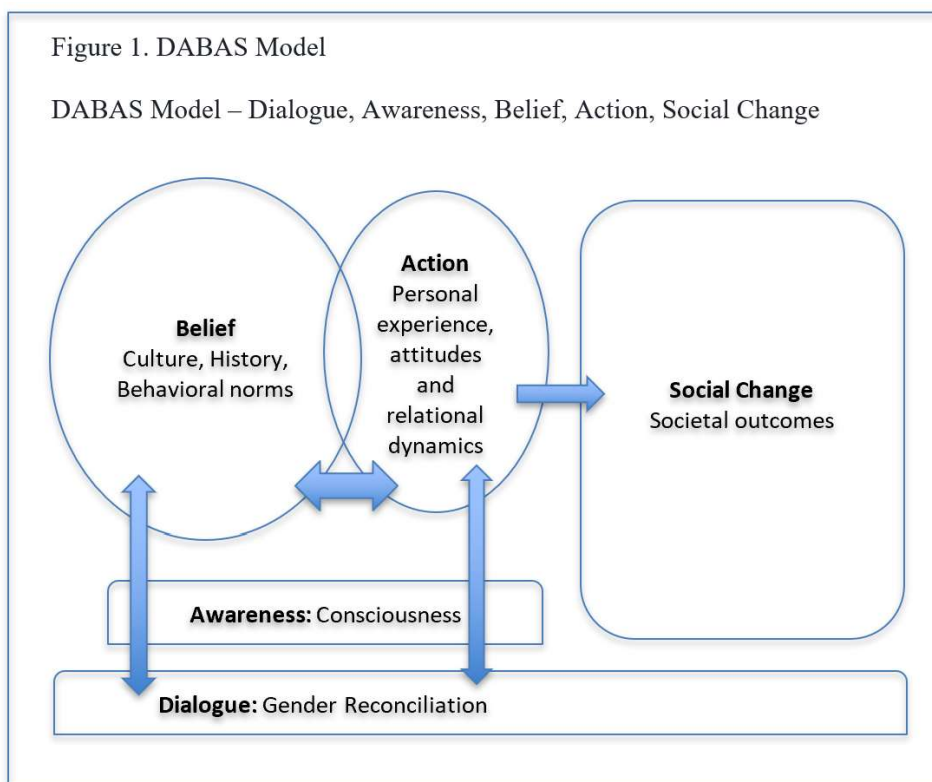
Transformative dialogue is a critical aspect of social change, as it creates the space for people to examine deeply entrenched social paradigms (Maoz, Steinberg, Bar-On & Fakhereldeen, 2002). With the expressed purpose of change in dialogue, participants reflect on and assess the behavior, beliefs, and dynamics in which they are apart. The success of dialogue processes in promoting social change is well documented, as structured personal experiences and reflection lead to personal change (Gower, Cornelius, Rawls, Walker, 2020; Nagda & Roper, 2019; Tint, Chirimwami & Sarkis, 2014). Nagda and Roper (2019) found that transformative dialogue challenges societal limitations, builds visions, moves past conflict, and leads to social change that includes positive outcomes for all groups. Senyshyn and Smith (2019) showed that disorienting experiences in a dialogue process cause participants to reflect and experience moments that change beliefs, attitudes, and actions. While dialogue for social change heightens self-development, Dugan (2017) found that it must include collective and relational orientations to build connections and the contextual knowledge those grounds and informs social change.

Dialogue and the Social Change Model

To develop a new conceptual framework of how dialogue can drive social change, this research study builds on the theoretical framework of the social change model (Dugan, 2017). The social change model, a framework for conceptualizing leadership for social change, has

three domains: (1) individual consciousness, alignment, and purpose; (2) relational, collaboration, group purpose; and (3) societal values and social change (Dugan, 2017). Dugan (2017) finds that the model offers a valuable framework for leadership development for social change. Therefore, as the study theorizes that personal actions to create change are an act of leadership, the study theorizes that participation in a dialogue process can ignite social change.

To build a new conceptual framework of dialogue as a driver of social change, this study adds “Dialogue” to the social change model to capture how a dialogue process impacts personal attitudes and relational dynamics. Next, this study adds “Awareness” to the social change model, as dialogue influences personal awareness and consciousness, which impacts attitudes, actions, and cultural beliefs. Finally, this study posits that beliefs which under gird cultural or group identity and existing collective consciousness can promote or hinder social change (Tint *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, this study adds “Belief” as a component to the social change model. These three additional elements—Dialogue, Awareness, and Belief—create conceptual framework for dialogue as a driver of social change, DABAS: Dialogue, Awareness, Belief, Action, Society.



In the DABAS model, belief encompasses culture as the greatest influence on personal actions, which includes experiences, attitudes, and how people identify, express themselves, and act individually and in the community. Together, belief and individual actions affect social change, collective experiences, and the reality of society. Yet, cultural beliefs are not the only driver. Individuals possess awareness and consciousness. This personal awareness, which underlies beliefs and individual actions, is the site for transformative dialogue. Dialogue can impact personal awareness, which influences beliefs, actions, and perceptions of oneself, others, and society. Therefore, dialogue is a tool, driver, and lever of social change that works through personal awareness, which in turn impacts beliefs that generate social change.

Dialogue unearths beliefs that are often unconscious, unquestioned, entrenched, and repeated through time, rituals, and culture (Tint et al., 2014). Dialogue stimulates awareness and enables participants to become conscious decision-makers about their own experiences, attitudes, and actions in society (Nagda & Roper, 2019; Hendricks, 2020). The DABAS framework provides a model to analyze how dialogue can impact personal transformation and social change.

Gender Reconciliation and Social Change

Gender reconciliation is a dialogue process of the “Gender Equity and Reconciliation International” project of the Satyana Institute. Gender reconciliation brings women and men together to examine their experiences around gender, “to speak the depths of your truth, experience the power of collective healing, and transmute dysfunctional gender conditioning into beloved communities” (Satyana Institute, 2021). The gender reconciliation process, with its own unique conceptualization, also mirrors elements of the social change model (Dugan, 2017): (1) personal change through dialogue impacts individual consciousness, (2) the process of collective dialogue of women and men mirrors the relational aspect of change, and (3) the examination of social norms, which posits change as personal, relational, and socially oriented.

Will Keepin and Cynthia Brix founded GERI, and with 175 trained facilitators, more than 27,000 participants in 18 countries have participated in gender reconciliation workshops (Satyana Institute, 2021). As gender is a fundamental construct of humanity across cultures, gender reconciliation is a valuable process to examine beliefs and constructs. The training includes all genders and sexualities and participants in any country, religion, or culture.

The GERI model draws from tenets of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa centers gender as the construct for examination. While the TRC was established

to allow collective testimony and healing in the context of brutality, atrocities, violence, and apartheid, the TRC provides a conceptual basis to consider gender as a site for reconciliation and social transformation, where women and men share a facilitated space to be heard and to hear each other. Gibson (2006) found that the TRC was effective in disrupting divisive social constructs and allowed people to empathize with the experiences of others, a core element in personal and social transformation. Driver (2005) assessed the nature of women's participation in the TRC and noted that women giving voice to their own experiences psychologically made real experiences that had been suppressed.

In a larger social context, Gibson (2009) noted that the South African leaders positioned and described the TRC as a process for broader societal change, rather than a process only for direct reconciliation between victims and perpetrators. Yet, du Toit (2017) found that while many South Africans believed that witnessing conflict resolution in the TRC was beneficial, they felt that the TRC did not mitigate poverty nor include lower-income people in the country's economic gains. This finding underlines the necessity to emphasize that dialogue cannot singly shape all of society. Instead, dialogue is a process that influences the consciousness of people, which drives change through multiple systems, including economic, legal, and educational.

Van Schalkwyk and Godobo-Madikizela (2017) used the gender reconciliation process with a group of female and male college students at a South African University. Through structured truth-telling dialogues, students shared personal experiences and interrogated deeply entrenched patriarchal constructs through a gendered lens. The researchers found that when students expressed internalized trauma, they forged empathetic connections with each other. These connections led to compassionate conversations, where they shared painful experiences, leading to a greater willingness to hear others.

Men Engage Alliance (2020) emphasized the significance of women and men working together as stakeholders and co-beneficiaries of shared progress, rather than only pursuing gender-specific programs and strategies. In 1995, South Africa established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bring healing to the nation. In 2020, as South African President Ramaphosa expressed the critical urgency of reducing gender-based violence, the parallel of using the gender reconciliation process for social change warrants serious examination.

Goals of the Study

The paper examines how dialogue can promote social change by examining the Gender Equity and Reconciliation International (GERI) dialogue process. The research questions are: (1) what elements of gender reconciliation create the possibility for personal transformation? (2) What do participants experience in gender reconciliation that leads to personal transformation? (3) How does the experience of personal transformation generate social change beyond the dialogue process? The first question aims to understand the methodology of the GERI process. The next two questions aim to understand the impact of gender reconciliation. The study has two research hypotheses: (1) the experience of heightened awareness of attitudes and beliefs leads to personal transformation through changes in attitude, beliefs, and mindset. (2) The experience of personal change in the dialogue process leads to new shifts in ongoing behaviors and personal actions, which can impact communal change.

The study proceeds in two phases. The research methodology is a participant observation qualitative inquiry (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010) which positions the researcher as both a participant and a conductor of analysis. The paper first describes key components of gender reconciliation, what it addresses, and how the process works. With primary firsthand experience, the researcher

participated in a gender reconciliation workshop and took notes on the process, methodology, and personal experiences. Respecting the confidentiality of the process and participants, the researcher did not note any participants by their name or comments, only the experience of the researcher and observation of the process. The researcher also conducted a preliminary one-hour interview with the GERI co-founders to understand the basic tenets of gender reconciliation. In the second phase, the study conducts qualitative research to understand the impact of gender reconciliation and uses the DABAS model to analyze the results.

The Gender Equity and Reconciliation International (GERI) Dialogue Process

Gender reconciliation is a facilitated, structured, and experiential process that engages men and women in a dialogue about gender. The structure of gender reconciliation allows a reflective dialogue that generally would not happen in the normal course of life. The GERI process itself is disruptive, outside of typical ways of communicating with others and expressing oneself. The process emphasizes an egalitarian approach where all can enter, participate, contribute equally, and be heard. This dialogue allows men and women to interact as they may never have before, truly seeing and experiencing the humanity of each other.

Trained facilitators lead the process. GERI structures the process over three days and also engages participants in shorter workshops that introduce the GERI process. The structural elements that underlie the process are: (1) ground agreements for speaking and listening, (2) a structured process that facilitates dialogue, (3) the process is experiential, and (4) a closing ritual toward reconciliation.

Ground Agreements

The facilitators set clear ground agreements to set a framework and intention for the dialogue. These agreements guide how a participant contributes as speaker and listener. A core principle is privacy. In the dialogue, participants do not speak directly to another person's experience or address or evaluate another person's story. The facilitators ask participants to share as comfortable and to honor the space for the stories of others without directly validating or invalidating the words of another.

The facilitator creates the space for participants to share without offering advice, criticism, judgment, commentary, or even approval. In that way, participants listen fully to others and speak to their own experiences. The facilitators design the environment to create an openness of speaking and listening in a relational context. This creates the experience of authentic listening, not evaluating, interpreting, advising, or asking questions, but hearing a person from their vantage point (Covey, 1989). The process creates a shared group experience where an individual can be fully present in the depths of their emotions within a group. The process opens a participant to fully hear others and transcend their own beliefs, thoughts, and expectations of other people.

For some, sharing can be emotional. Yet, the process is not meant to be "therapy, yet can be therapeutic," according to a participant in this study. The ground agreements create receptivity to others, "attentiveness," and openness to "responding to their Being" (Cooper, Chak, Cornish, Gillespie, 2013, p. 73). This receptivity is a critical component in transformative dialogue (Cooper et al. 2013, Gower et al., 2020).

Structured Process

Gender reconciliation is a structured dialogue and facilitated experience to allow speaking, hearing, and the reflective space to reconcile, understand, appreciate, and hear one's own truth and others. The facilitators structure the dialogue to promote sharing experiences with gender and gender-based constructs. The dialogue is not a free-flowing conversation of back and forth, nor an exchange of ideas. Rather, the process is structured to allow speaking and listening to experiences of gender. This process allows participants to experience deep, active listening and truly hearing the perspective of others. Throughout the process, the facilitators create multiple groupings for dialogue: the whole group together of women and men, groups of men only, and groups of women only to share and reflect together. With a series of structured questions and prompts, the facilitator creates a space of reflection and sharing, allowing participants to respond to questions on their experiences around gender. Then, the facilitators create the space to allow participants to internally examine what may have never been realized, spoken, or acknowledged.

Experiential Process

The next key element of gender reconciliation is that the process is experiential. Peck (1987) in *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* emphasizes the significance of experiential learning. It requires more effort, personal involvement, and willingness, yet ultimately is more effective at personal change. Gender reconciliation is not a content process. There is no teaching, informing, or instilling knowledge about gender. Instead, the process draws from the lived experiences of the participants. Every sharing of information comes from the participants. They share their own truths from their experiences and reflections. The gender

reconciliation process does not teach about what is correct or incorrect. Women and men can choose to share honestly. The process immerses participants into an experience of sharing openly, to the extent one is willing or comfortable, and into the feelings and perspectives of others. In this space, participants can see their own experiences and reflect on gender.

Reconciliation

The gender reconciliation process aims to create an experience of reconciliation, to create understanding and healing. The process creates an experience of dissonance. In encountering new and different human experiences, a participant can reflect on their own feelings and thoughts in the context of these new viewpoints and their own beliefs, knowledge, and preconceived notions of another (Locklin, 2010). The process allows them, through dialogue, to experience the humanity of themselves and another. There, they can reconcile and integrate this experience within their own conscious awareness. Yet, the process does not mandate nor require reconciliation. Instead, the process is structured to allow, set the stage, and invite a personal willingness toward gender reconciliation. Therefore, the transformation emerges within the experience and consciousness of an individual.

Finally, the process closes with a ritual and the presentation of an offering. The facilitators ask the women and men to share what they would like to offer to each other in the space they collectively share. The gender reconciliation process ends with the energy of giving, offering affirmations to others, and sharing the actions they will take as they leave the dialogue space.

Qualitative Research

The second phase of the research assesses the impact of gender reconciliation and its connection to social change. The study conducts two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two gender reconciliation workshop participants to analyze the impact of GERI on personal transformation and social change. Each interview was conducted individually via Zoom and lasted for one hour. The participants agreed to participate in the study after responding to a direct inquiry seeking participation. The interview questions followed this protocol and included follow-up questions to ascertain a greater depth of information:

- What drew you to GERI as a participant?
- What drew you to GERI as a facilitator?
- What did you experience as a participant?
- What have you experienced as a facilitator?
- How do you define the gender reconciliation process?
- What impact on others have you witnessed in your work as a facilitator?
- What is your vision for what gender reconciliation can achieve?

The Study Participants

The participants, one female and one male, are former participants in a gender reconciliation workshop, both South African, and both later became facilitators with Gender Equity and Reconciliation International. Participant 1 (female) is a single mother and community activist who led programs in gender work and youth development. Participant 2 (male) is a married father and Christian minister who led community dialogues and social and economic development programs.

Qualitative Analysis

The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews and coded the data to identify core themes that emerged about their participation in the gender reconciliation process. The study used the DABAS model to code and organise the data in five areas: Dialogue, Awareness, Belief, Action, and Social Change. This data coding provides the framework to examine their experiences to: (1) understand how personal transformation occurs and (2) how the social change occurs. Then, the study uses the findings to assess the DABAS framework as a practical conceptual framework for understanding how dialogue can generate social change. In analyzing the data, core themes emerged about their personal motivation that drew them to the gender reconciliation work, its necessity, and their reflections on culture and possibilities for personal change. Table 1 contains the data of representative phrases for each component of the DABAS framework for each participant.

Personal Motivation

Both participants were involved in social change work before entering the gender reconciliation workshop. Participant 1 worked with an organization that focused on gender awareness. Participant 2 worked in community development, where he recognized the need to create more “space for women” and opportunities for them to lead. In separate interviews, both noted the South African president’s naming of Gender-based violence as the “second pandemic” and the urgent need for social change (Adebayo, 2020). Participant 2 mentioned the disturbing, shocking, brutal murder of a South African 19-year-old woman and “femicide” as part of the urgency to confront GBV (Adebayo, 2019). Their references to the South African president demonstrated how they oriented their work in the context of broader social change. This finding

became the frame for the research paper: The work of gender reconciliation is part of a clear, missionary, and intentional focus on collective change in South Africa and beyond.

Personal Experience and Cultural Paradigms

Both study participants referenced cultural beliefs and attitudes that were social norms. They referenced their own experience of how participating in the gender reconciliation process allowed them to see cultural beliefs and their impacts on them more clearly. They both referenced personal histories and childhood experiences that surfaced in the gender reconciliation process. They noted that the process allowed them to share painful personal experiences and unearth suppressed feelings, leading to their own healing process beyond the workshop.

They noted the benefits of sharing on a personal emotional level. However, thematically, they emphasized different emotional aspects and core needs. Participant 1, the female participant, emphasized the need to feel and know “I matter” and the desire to be heard. While Participant 2, (male), repeatedly referenced “vulnerability” in sharing his emotions. Participant 1 shared feelings of needing to express her pain and voice and that the workshop allowed her to express her voice. She noted that social and cultural norms had suppressed her voice and her full expression. Likewise, Participant 2 spoke of sharing hurt and pain that he had never expressed. He noted the cultural norms that cause men to “suppress emotions.”

Interestingly, the gender reconciliation process enabled them to express what they both had suppressed in their own lived experiences. While Participant 1’s value and voice as a girl and woman had been suppressed in her life and culture, she expressed the “fullness” of her feelings, voice, and truth in the gender reconciliation dialogue process. While Participant 2’s

feelings and emotions were suppressed in being “aman” and needing to appear “strong,” he was able to express his feelings and pain in the dialogue process. For both participants, their personal experience in gender reconciliation differed from what was permissible or commonplace in their cultural experience.

Table 1. Analysis of Participant Interviews using the DABAS Model

DABAS Model	Table 2	
	Analysis of Participant Interviews	
	Participant 1 (female)	Participant 2 (male)
Dialogue	Reflection on the gender reconciliation process	
	“Witness men listening” “Bear witness to others” “I see your pain” “Hear women’s stories” “actually felt seen” “Listen without judgment or challenge” “Creates a space for opening” “Speaks to my humanity” “Seen as a human being that is worthy...deserving of being fully who I am” “Hear the challenges and suffering of others”	“Open up self,” “therapeutic” “Courage to share truth” “Share my truth without thinking” “Letting go of deep anger” “Not generalize,” “not judge” “Opens up emotions”
Awareness	Inner Shifts and Realizations through Dialogue	
	“Inner transformation of hearing the humanity and heart of another person”	“I was personally changed” “self-forgiveness”

	<p>“Feeling that I matter”</p> <p>“Release anger”</p> <p>“Need for being heard”</p> <p>“Not being heard and seen”</p>	<p>“acceptance”</p> <p>“Vulnerable”</p> <p>“Suppression of emotions”</p> <p>“Do not want to be seen as emotional”</p>
Belief	Cultural norms and examination of gender constructs	
	<p>“Patriarchy is taught”</p> <p>“Men are taught to not hear women”</p> <p>“Culture...what it demands of a man...reinforces patriarchy”</p>	<p>“Buying and owning women in lobola”*</p> <p>“Hostilities...as women are viewed as a piece furniture”</p> <p>“Women’s role is...to serve man”</p> <p>“Men being strong at all times” “man enough” “boys don’t cry”</p> <p>Names/labels of “sissy” “soft” “girl”</p>
Action	Personal shifts, changes, and actions around gender	
	<p>“Change story”</p> <p>“Shifts in perspective,” “a paradigm shift,” “fullness of who I am”</p> <p>“Not men versus women...but human beings”</p>	<p>“Vulnerability is a position of strength”</p> <p>“Change mindset”</p> <p>“Influenced perspective”</p> <p>“Vulnerability connects people at the heart level”</p>
Society	Visions for society and change	

	“Gender healed society” “Women safe from violence” “Do not have to fight to be who they authentically are”	“Achieve reconciliation between the genders” “Women safe,” “every woman is my sister” “Right to express self” “Dream for children to be treated as who they are”
--	--	---

*Participant 2 noted that “lobola” has become a more individualized commercialized practice, as distinguished from family rooted practices that value and protect women

Personal and Social Change

Both participants expressed personal transformation and change. Participant 1, noted a “peeling away of layers” and a “softening” in herself as she witnessed and heard others in gender reconciliation. Here, the seed of personal transformation lies. Both participants experienced the contrast between their truths, feelings, and their lived experiences to the social norms and beliefs that had governed, shaped, limited, and influenced their life experiences. Experiencing, seeing, feeling, and expressing the disconnect between their personal experience and their culturally shaped experiences created a tangible shift in their awareness. Participant 2 noted that the gender reconciliation process exposed the “cultural demands on men and women” and the limiting gender constructs. The need for a societal paradigm change emerged as they both expressed appreciation of the full humanity of women and men and the values that support this reality.

Discussion

First, in examining the key elements of gender reconciliation that led to personal transformation and change, the structure of the process created the context for an in-depth,

revealing personal discussion that participants had never experienced. The structure allowed the participants the space to experience sharing their own truths and deeply listening to the truths of others. There, they could witness others and examine their own experiences of gender, belief, and culture. Similar to intergroup contact theory, the structure of gender reconciliation created “equal status” between women and men, where the ongoing interactions and shared purpose create the possibility of a change in attitude (Maoz, Steinberg, Bar-On & Fakhereldeen, 2002, p. 935; Allport, 1954).

The gender reconciliation elements of the structured process, experiential nature, and ground agreements created a cognitive and reflective space for the participants to experience inner shifts and changes. Being able to voice their own experiences in the space of others and discuss their conflicts with cultural norms allowed them to experience dissonance between their own reality and cultural reality. This dissonance enabled them to surface and express their truth and personal experience of gender norms, beliefs, and gender constructs. Similar to the experience in the TRC, the participants had the experience of personal dissonance, where giving voice to their own experiences, which had not been previously expressed, made the experiences real (Driver, 2005).

Personal Awareness

Next, several key themes emerged in examining the second research question: What do participants experience in gender reconciliation that leads to personal transformation? First, the dialogue process resulted in a change of their awareness that impacted their beliefs. Notably, each participant experienced a moment of becoming aware of, appreciating, and finding meaning in their own personal experiences that were differed and stood in contrast to cultural norms and

gender constructs. This awareness emerged as they gave voice to their own experience in the gender reconciliation dialogue and shared their experiences of how the culture had impacted them. This awareness allowed them to see cultural beliefs more clearly and distinctly and begin to challenge and question the impact of these beliefs.

The experience of sharing fully and being fully present in the experiences, emotions, and truths of others expanded and opened their awareness, leading to a change in attitudes and mindset as they experienced the realities of others. There, they experienced an inner, personal reconciliation of their own cultural attitudes with the lived experience of other participants speaking their truths. This enhanced personal awareness became a new perspective of self, attitudes, beliefs, culture, which led to a greater awareness of the need for social change—what is both possible and necessary.

Pathways for Social Change

Next, the data provides insight into the third research question: How does the experience of personal transformation generate social change beyond the dialogue process? The personal changes they experienced, a shift in attitudes and behaviors, impacted their social actions after the dialogue process (Flint, 2019). Because of participating in gender reconciliation, their desire to express their attitudes about gendered experiences and expectations became more pronounced in their personal and professional lives. Both participants became compelled to align their lives with their new attitudes and to take action upon their realizations. As they both were already active community leaders, their inner changes around gender, culture, and belief further compelled them to integrate this awareness into their community work. They both were inspired to become GERI facilitators and infuse gender reconciliation into their work and leadership.

As one person is affected and transformed by gender reconciliation, their personal transformation catalyzes social change through their sites, circles, and opportunities for direct action and influence. Through their existing community networks, the impact of their personal changes was magnified, extending far beyond the initial gender reconciliation dialogue.

On the continent of Africa, we need Africans to do this work.”

- Participant 1, gender reconciliation participant and facilitator

Both participants have trained and reached hundreds of people as gender reconciliation facilitators. Here, they both noted how their personal transformation impacted them and others. Participant 2 said that gender reconciliation influenced his ministry and now works with a network of ministers in South Africa to bring gender reconciliation to even more communities. He also witnessed personal changes in ministry leaders he worked with, as they had a new desire to engage the community and church members in gender reconciliation dialogues.

Participant 1 noted how her personal changes after gender reconciliation impacted her close relationships. Her change in mindset influenced her mothering, the raising of other family members, and how she views, relates, and encourages them in their personal growth. She expanded her work with gender issues by working with young people at universities. After participating in gender reconciliation, she noted that the youth, motivated by the change they experienced, organically moved together, “self-organizing,” desiring to engage more young people. She noted the significance of building the capacity of more people to lead the work in

universities, religious ministries, and local people leading the process to initiate dialogue in their communities.

Both participants demonstrated that pathways for social change expand through relational networks and expanding connections. Participant 1 facilitates training in South Africa and globally with virtual training. She emphasized that “Africans must lead this work” and is engaging women in collaborations in East Africa, international peace initiatives in Kenya, and throughout the continent. Participant 2 noted that personal awareness is critical for leaders in social change. To change social, collective mindsets, leaders must begin with their own awareness. Without awareness, he emphasized there is “bleeding on people.” Therefore, “until we heal, we cannot heal others” and are “causing more harm.” His personal experience as a minister, who experienced and now leads gender reconciliation workshops with an expanding network of ministers, reveals how awareness is a key driver in social change.

“Plant a small seed for a generation.”

Participant 2, gender reconciliation participant and facilitator

Both participants have broad social visions and actively work for widespread social impact. They experienced, witnessed, and are agents of social change that begins on the personal level. The outgrowth of personal change can influence all facets of life, including those who create policies and laws. Through dialogue, social change expands through the collective consciousness, a process of “organized diffusion” where social and organizational networks become the fertile ground where social change grows (Cislaghi et al., 2019, p.937).

The Value of a Framework

Through the lens of the DABAS framework (Dialogue, Awareness, Belief, Action, Social change), clear pathways emerge on how dialogue shifts personal awareness, beliefs on gender constructs, and generates action toward social change. Participants experienced a core personal shift in the gender reconciliation process. Their awareness influenced their beliefs and actions within a broader social context.

Dialogue in gender reconciliation impacts the conscious, personal awareness within a group process that makes personal transformation possible. The dialogue process allows space to fully experience oneself, assess gender constructs, embrace new personal awareness and beliefs, and take specific actions for social change. These findings correspond with the literature on the social change model that explains how shifts in individual consciousness within a group can impact the socially oriented leadership that generates social change (Dugan,2017).

These findings demonstrate that the DABAS Model presents a clear framework to conceptualize how dialogue can generate social change and provides a tool that practitioners can use to facilitate, assess, and measure change. Yet, this study suggests that social change is incremental. Drawing from social change psychology theory, incremental social change occurs when events, “if profound enough, will gradually change the social and normative structures” (de la Sablonnière, 2017). Urgent societal rallying calls can catalyze change, such as the call to reduce GBV of President Ramaphosa. Dialogue offers a path toward change that engages people to become creators and shapers of their consciousness, beliefs, culture, and communities.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study developed a conceptual framework of gender reconciliation as a tool for social change, it was a small study. Therefore, significant variations between participant experiences could not be determined. Another potential limitation is that the study participants were former gender reconciliation participants who became GERI trainers. As facilitators, they may be more reflective and conscious about their transformation than perhaps a person who participated in a single workshop. Yet, their rich qualitative insights drew on a wealth of experience, awareness, and action toward change and provided meaningful insights. A larger study with male and female participants could examine: How do men and women experience the same process of gender reconciliation? How do differences or similarities inform actions for social change?

Conclusion

As South African President Ramaphosa issued a stirring call to action to reduce gender-based violence and the study participants connected their work in facilitating gender reconciliation to this call, the gender reconciliation dialogue process can become a viable widespread strategy to reduce gender-based violence. The study showed a meaningful shift within the awareness of the participants, a change in their attitudes that led to actions for collective change to impact others. While both participants support gender equity, they both referenced problems in various approaches to gender equity in society. Participant 1 noted that while there is broad awareness of social problems around GBV and “dysfunctional” aspects of gender constructs, there is “very little strategy.” She discussed the emotional “charge” and “fighting” encountered around gender-based issues. In contexts where social power and social

norms seem threatened, she noted gender reconciliation as an approach that invites women and men in dialogue together (Butt, Kenny & Cislighi, 2020). Participant 2 referenced “resistance” to gender equity in society and “colonial interpretations” of gender that are more individual and not rooted in family or community. He noted, “there is no one truth.” Yet, the common obstacle to dialogue is a belief that if one holds “truth,” the other does not have “truth,” which is often rooted in identity-based conflicts (Ben David, Hameiri, Benheim, Leshem, Sarid, Sternberg, Nadler, & Sagy, 2017).

Gender reconciliation creates the structured space to hear multiple truths, appreciate a common humanity, and engage communities in difficult conversations around gender. Conversations around gender equity can be experienced as confrontational, especially if strongly held beliefs rooted in cultural connections are challenged or regarded as right or wrong. These conversations can seem threatening to cultures or historical values that provide a common social basis. As gender reconciliation can transform personal awareness and influence the beliefs that underlie GBV, the dialogue process can shift power dynamics between men and women by creating more just, respectful, and open conversations. The process allows women and men to co-create the relationships and cultural dynamics that improve social outcomes and promote the safety and welfare of everyone.

While dialogue can be transformative, the process depends on the willingness of people to engage. It is not a process to be dictated for people to participate. Instead, the precursor is the invitation or desire to engage, speak and listen. Yet, to be effective, the gender reconciliation process requires the intentional investment of time and attention of the participants (Peck, 1987).

As societal transformation is a collective process, it requires the agency and actions of individuals. This point to a societal question: Can any social change, sustainable over time and across the population, occur without the willing engagement of citizens? Social change depends, evolves, and flows from many factors. Yet, the dialogue process provides an invitation, process, and tool to engage the consciousness of people for change, which can create ripple effects in a community and society. The DABAS conceptual framework reveals how one gender reconciliation dialogue with a small group of people creates small changes and expands the influence socially and collectively.

Finally, as with the Truth and Reconciliation, bearing witness to what socially transformative dialogue can accomplish plants massive seeds for social change. Dialogue presents a strategy based on the shared human experience that does not impose a belief system onto a person, community, or culture. Rather, the transformation comes through the collective, personal examination of their own experiences. In gender reconciliation, women and men can transform prevailing power dynamics into the power of the entire humanity together, dialoguing in a beloved community.

References

- Adebayo, B. (2019). A post office worker was given three life sentences for raping and murdering a student. Now South African women are saying enough. CNN. November 15, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/15/africa/south-africa-student-murder-sentence/index.html>
- Adebayo, B. (2020). South Africa has the continent's highest Covid-19 cases. Now it has another pandemic on its hands. CNN. June 19, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/19/africa/south-africa-gender-violence-pandemic-intl/index.html>
- Allport, G.W. The nature of prejudice. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954.
- Ben David, Y., Hameiri, B., Benheim, S., Leshem, B., Sarid, A., Sternberg, M., Nadler, A., & Sagy, S. (2017). Exploring ourselves within intergroup conflict: The role of intragroup dialogue in promoting acceptance of collective narratives and willingness toward reconciliation. *Peace and Conflict*, 23(3), 269-277.
- Butt, A. P., Kenny, L., & Cislighi, B. (2020). Integrating a social norms perspective to address community violence against SriLankan women and girls: A call for research and practice. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 29(7), 826-834.
- Cislighi, B., Denny, E. K., Cissé, M., Gueye, P., Shrestha, B., Shrestha, P. N., Ferguson, G., Hughes, C., & Clark, C. J. (2019). Changing social norms: The importance of “Organized diffusion” for scaling up community health promotion and women empowerment interventions. *Prevention Science*, 20(6), 936-946.
- Cooper, M., Chak, A., Cornish, F., & Gillespie, A. (2013). Dialogue: Bridging personal, community, and social transformation. *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 53(1), 70-93.
- Covey, S. R. (1989). The seven habits of highly effective people: Restoring the character ethic. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Crux (2020). South Africa bishops warn against ‘second pandemic’ of gender-based violence. Crux. June 23, 2020. <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2020/06/south-africa-bishops-warn-against-second-pandemic-of-gender-based-violence/>
- de la Sablonnière R. (2017). Toward a Psychology of Social Change: A Typology of Social Change. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 397.
- (DeWalt), K. M., & DeWalt, B. R. (2010). Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers. AltaMira Press.
- Dlamini, N. J. (2021). Gender-based violence, twin pandemic to COVID-19. *Critical Sociology*, 47(4-5), 583-590.
- Driver, D. (2005). Truth, reconciliation, gender: The South African truth and reconciliation commission and black women's intellectual history. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 20(47), 219.
- Dugan, J. P. (2017). *Leadership theory: Cultivating critical perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- du Toit, F. (2017). A broken promise? Evaluating South Africa’s reconciliation process twenty years on. *International Political Science Review*, 38(2), 169-184.

- Flint, M. A. (2019). Healing a divided nation: Transforming spaces through sustained dialogue. *Review of Higher Education*, 42(5), 337-361.
- Gibson, J. L. (2006). The contributions of truth to reconciliation: Lessons from South Africa. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50(3), 409-432.
- Gibson, J. L. (2009). On legitimacy theory and the effectiveness of truth commissions. *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 72(2), 123-141.
- Gower, K., Cornelius, L., Rawls, R., & Walker, B. B. (2020). Reflective structured dialogue: A qualitative thematic analysis. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 37(3), 207-221.
- Hendricks, F. (2020). Reflective practice of islamophobia intergroup dialogues in higher education. *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies (Print)*, 2(1), 97-106.
- Leburu-Masigo, G., & Kgadima, N. P. (2020). Gender-based Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic in South Africa: Guidelines for Social Work Practice. *Gender & Behaviour*, 18(4), 16618-16628.
- Locklin, R. B. (2010). Weakness, belonging, and the intercordia experience: The logic and limits of dissonance as a transformative learning tool. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 13(1), 3-14.
- Marcus, R., & Harper, C. (2014). Gender justice and social norms-processes of change for adolescent girls. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- McLean, L., Heise, L. L., & Stern, E. A. (2020). Shifting and transforming gender-inequitable beliefs, behaviours and norms in intimate partnerships: The Indashyikirwa couples programme in Rwanda. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 22, 13-30.
- Men Engage Alliance (2020). Contexts and Challenges for Gender Transformative Work with Men and Boys: A Discussion Paper.
- Maoz, I., Steinberg, S., Bar-On, D., & Fakhereldeen, M. (2002). The dialogue between the 'Self' and the 'Other': A process analysis of Palestinian-Jewish encounters in Israel. *Human Relations (New York)*, 55(8), 931-962.
- Nagda, B., Roper, L. (2019). Reimagining leadership development for social change through critical dialogue practices. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2019(163), 117-136.
- Peck, M. S. (1987). *The different drum: Community-making and peace*. New York: Touchstone.
- Piedalue, A., Gilbertson, A., Alexeyeff, K., & Klein, E. (2020). Is gender-based violence a social norm? Rethinking power in a popular development intervention. *Feminist Review*, 126(1), 89-105.
- Satyana Institute (2021). *Gender Equity and Reconciliation International*.
<https://www.gendereconciliationinternational.org/>
- Saunders, H. (1999). A public peace process: Sustained Dialogue to transform racial and ethnic conflicts. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Senyshyn, R. M., & Smith, P. (2019). Global awareness dialogue project: Exploring potential for faculty transformation through a professional development series. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 17(4), 318-336.
- Tint, B., Chirimwami, V., & Sarkis, C. (2014). Diasporas in dialogue: Lessons from reconciliation efforts in African refugee communities. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 32(2), 177-202.
- Van Schalkwyk S., Godobo-Madikizela, P. (2017). *Research on Gender Equity and Reconciliation: Processes for Transforming Gender Oppression at a South African University* [Unpublished manuscript]. Psychology Department, University of the Free State.