



Creating Safe Spaces

Overview: To create a safe space, collectively defined by participants in which they can bring their “full selves,” ensure mutual learning is possible and risk is mitigated.

Purpose: In feminist popular education, much of our conversation and developing analysis will be based on sharing experiences of oppression. These experiences have moved us in some way, to act; but they have not left us unchanged and creating space to delve into those issues can surface painful memories and deep emotion. As facilitators, we must prepare for this and create safe spaces for women to share, honour that emotion and move towards action. Another aspect of safe space is that our activism can put us at risk – we must make sure that in designing safe spaces we think about this and put in mechanisms to mitigate threat. This session uses dialogue to create a physical and emotional space that enables mutual learning and an articulation of shared principles that govern the space to ensure we are all safe as women first, and then as activists.

Time: 1 hour+

Materials:

- Tissues
- Flip chart paper
- Pens/large markers
- Consent forms
- Cushions/comfortable chairs
- Medical aid kit including sanitary towels and tampons.
- Jugs of water.
- Bowl of fruit, healthy snacks
- Jugs of water available throughout.
- General safety tips (if necessary this includes security point person) and emergency contact numbers

Credit: This is adapted by JASS SNA and draws on the work of many others including Raising Voices and Capacitar





Process:

Prior to the workshop:

Setting up a safe space, starts well before the actual workshop begins. All aspects from design to implementation to the follow-up phase are equally important in creating a safe, respectful environment for participants. Each step sends a message to workshop participants that they are respected and valued.

- The working spaces should be safe, welcoming and extremely comfortable, allowing participants to relax let go of the worries of their daily life and focus on the workshop, encourages participation and creates a climate of solidarity and trust. This could include sitting in a circle, brightening up the space and or bringing each participant a gift.
- Look at the room and note considerations such as ventilation and accessibility for all participants.
- The space ideally should have inside and outside areas, have separate meeting areas for break-always; be bright and colourful and provide a variety of seating options including a more informal space where participants can sit on the floor with cushions (*for more, see checklist on choosing a venue below*).
- A pre-workshop participant security check should be completed in order to ensure that facilitators are aware of any security concerns (this could be via a telephone check-in or using an online survey as part of getting other information from participants).
- Ask participants to bring an object that has some meaning for them to use in their introductions.
- Prepare a consent form – to use quotes, visuals and audio generated in the process - that participants can sign.
- Prepare for deep emotion to emerge – agree on some grounding activities and who will take the lead if this happens.
- Prepare external support contact list (list of people able to provide medical and/or psycho-social support to participants if necessary; if possible this could include healing traditions like massage, acupuncture etc.).

A note on sitting in circle: We believe that how we arrange the space has a political basis and seating arrangements are important to the success of the workshop. In most traditional workshops, participants are seated behind tables, or at desks, in rows or sometimes in a circle. Facilitators are seated at the front, and also are behind a table or a desk. In Feminist Popular Education, we want to disrupt the formality of traditional workshop spaces that can foster disconnection between people and stifle the ability for participants to bring themselves fully into the space and engage authentically. Participants should be seated comfortably in a circle – without any desks or tables in front of them. Facilitators are seated together, but in the same circle. This is a very deliberate form of seating, creating connections and a safe



space. Our education is about analysing and challenging power – sitting in a circle is an expression of that – directly challenging the power relations between facilitators and participants; and between participants who may hold different roles in a hierarchy – by putting us all on the same level.

During the workshop:

Creating a safe space is a process that requires multiple layers, from the set-up of the room to the first few exercises participants engage in together. The following have been used successfully to do this and develop logic for doing this:

- **Introducing ourselves:** Introduce yourself using just your name and share with the group the object/s you have brought; explaining why it may have meaning for you personally/professionally. Use some cloth at the centre of the room to collect the items – some may inspire us and sustain us in the workshop; others may destabilise us because they remind us of the heavy load we carry or the risks we face. Encourage participants to acknowledge this duality and live with it.
- Introduce the next part of the session as being about ‘creating safe space’ for all of us. Ask participants to share what **their idea of a safe space is?** What would make them free safe in the space? What are the principles that will enable the space to be safe? (20 minutes)
- If they do not come up, add the issues of: consent (for use of visuals, audio or quotes), confidentiality, safety and security (if necessary identify one person to direct security concerns to); thinking about differing abilities and time for self-care (fun!).
- In large groups, it can be helpful to appoint a pair of people each day who act together as Support People for the space. If participants have a specific need that has to be addressed such as translation, speed of talking or something has come up in-discussion that is troubling them/making them feel unsafe and don't want to say it in the group, they can connect with the support people.

Group discussion and agreement on **consent with regards photos, voice and how to be comfortable to be quoted.** If there is a social media strategy for the event/workshop, this should be specifically discussed (10 minutes). Encourage the group to think about the importance of amplifying our voices and experiences; connecting to other communities and groups of women whilst being creative to ensure we can do this safely (e.g. What about group photos only? What about using first names only?).

How do we learn – the next layer is to talk specifically about **what would help us, and what would make it difficult to learn in this space.** Set-up the conversation by speaking about how we all learn differently, have different hopes and fears; different skills, experiences and ways of understanding. Ask individuals or pairs to think about one thing that would help them learn



and one thing that would make learning hard – write all the things that would help on one colour cards; the obstacles on another colour and stick up on wall in place of the usual ‘rules’ or ‘principles’ for the space. Ensure all the points are clear to all and ask the group – is there anything else we need to think about?

Possible steps in a process to respond to deep emotion (Credit: Raising Voices/JASS facilitator workshop 2016): The next step is not linear but needs to be planned for and be able to be activated when deep emotion arises. Facilitator must acknowledge the value of safe space and inevitability of emotion; see it as part of the work and necessary for activism.

- **Acknowledge** the deep pain and sharing – make sure the participant knows you are hearing them (e.g. make eye contact and if appropriate physical contact; repeat what they are saying and acknowledge it).
- After a few minutes, introduce a **grounding exercise** – bringing the group together (e.g. breathing, holding hands, etc.).
- Ask group if they have anything to **offer back** to the people who shared – (e.g. I really appreciate your sharing; I think your mother must have been a really strong woman) BUT make sure no new stories!
- **Processing** – Next the facilitator must link what has been shared back to our activism and our struggle for social change; speak to how deep emotion motivates us and moves us.
- Positive note – a song or something **uplifting** – draw on the skills of co-facilitators and participants.
- **Move on** in the process – ask if that is okay; accept some people may need to leave the space and if possible do the next activity in a different space at the venue.
- **Follow-up** – individual follow-up and provision of external support resources if necessary.

Closing the safe space:

This is an equally important part to the process and there are many methodologies that can be used (e.g. participants can write each other letters of appreciation; group massage in a circle), but for this method, we suggest re-visiting the object(s) offered in the introduction and asking participants to talk about the shifts from what they brought **in** to the space and what they now take out.

After the workshop:

Ensure that consent is checked to use quotes/visuals/audio in reports and on social media.

- Offer further professional help and talk individually to participants who may have been affected by/during the process.
- Ensure that any materials agreed to be shared with participants are shared.



Other Considerations for setting up safe spaces

Credit: Raising Voices/JASS facilitator workshop 2016

- FPE facilitators who create safe spaces have a sense of fun, enthusiasm and good humour which adds to establishing a space of trust, community and mutual inquiry.
- Non-judgement (not the same as allowing expressions of oppression).
- Develop the points that participants make – to support and link back to the session.
- The personal is political – respond to individual stories, and ensure that women are not seen as a) victims or b) to be at fault for something that is systemic.
- Be clear on the political basis for decisions – from safe space to content to logic/order to who speaks when; education is not neutral.
- Be clear on your own politics and privilege – what does holding an intersectional analysis mean for you in your context? (e.g. cannot teach anti-racism without truly taking account of own privilege).
- Inclusive language through-out e.g. non-alienating/discriminating to people of different gender identities and ability status. Materials should reflect this inclusive stance as well.
- Acknowledge the value of safe space and inevitability of emotion; see it as part of the work and necessary for activism.
- Once you have set up the safe space, it is your responsibility as the facilitator (alongside your co-facilitator/s) to ‘hold’ it – this includes addressing tricky issues that arise; holding participants to the principles agreed to; and responding to the deep emotion in the room (recognising and dealing with it).
- FPE and creating safe space is about tapping into/igniting power within; facilitator play a big role in whether this is possible for participants – how we value participants through gifts, not allowing expressions of oppression, understating our work challenges deeply held beliefs, listening hard, sharing personal moments of feeling powerful and receiving support go a long way to igniting power within.
- Go beyond ‘managing’ the space – not all views are equal - they have a politics – we support some politics over others – our responsibility is to hold the politics of the space.
- When inviting facilitators from outside, discuss the content and our politics beforehand.
- Use grounding/breathing/self-care practices in an integrated way throughout the process. No a once-off or ‘exotic’ activity. For ideas see: <http://capacitar.org/index.html>.
- Be prepared to respond to deep emotion (see possible steps for responding to deep emotion mentioned in the previous section).
- Don’t be afraid to take a break or close the process; if it becomes necessary and the group is not able to continue or to give the facilitators a chance to regroup.



Checklist questions when choosing a venue:

- ***Who is running the venue?*** Do they understand that the workshop is meant to offer a safe space for participants? - Ideally a venue will be reserved only for workshop participants.
- ***Who else is sharing the venue?*** If it is a shared space, will participants feel comfortable in their rooms and communal areas (for example, a venue that also caters to groups that may stay up late drinking, with loud music, would be inappropriate).
- ***How safe are the surrounding areas?*** Can participants walk in the area during the day and in the evening? It is particularly important that participants feel free to take walks and explore the town or natural surroundings without feeling threatened.
- ***Are the workshop organisers/venue owners able to access good health services in case of a medical emergency?*** Do they have the numbers of the ambulance service, local doctors, a pharmacy and a good health facility to hand? Is there someone at the venue who can assist with an emergency response?
- ***Is the region safe?*** The venue must be located in a geographical area that is appropriate for all participants. This is particularly relevant to frontline women activists working amidst repressive regimes or in some zones of conflict.
- ***Is the workshop space and accommodation combined?*** For safety, comfort and convenience, it is best that participants are accommodated in the same place as the workshop and for building relationships.
- ***Is it in a natural setting?*** Experience demonstrates consistently that a venue located outside of an urban area, with access to nature (forest, mountains or ocean) is ideal for a wellbeing circle. Rural, more secluded areas, also can offer a safer atmosphere for women, allowing women activists to walk around the venue without fear. Nature is a resource that can bring peace, calm and perspective.