

# Creating Safe Spaces

A safe space is collectively defined by the people in it as somewhere they can be their true selves, without having to ‘filter’ what they share or express but also, without causing further harm and oppression to others in that space. Many people who have suffered discrimination, harassment, abuse or other harms fear the repercussions of speaking out and sharing their experiences due to the power dynamics that have enabled and perpetuated their situation. These experiences and the impact they have on people’s lives often come with pain and deep emotion. Preserving a safe space is therefore critical while working on addressing intersectionality to ensure genuine mutual learning and to mitigate any potential risks.

## Be aware of your own power, privilege, attitudes, and beliefs

- Think about the factors that influence your personal values, experiences, interests, beliefs, and political commitment and how they relate to social and structural identities (e.g., gender identity, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, socioeconomic status, sexuality, disability, age, sexual orientation, immigrant status, faith, etc.) as well as processes of oppression (e.g., patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.) in your context.
- Take time to reflect honestly and critically on how your own beliefs and attitudes can cause you to pass judgement on others.
- If you believe that you are free from any responsibility and accountability in the role you may play in someone else’s oppression, check yourself again. Self-awareness is the ability to see yourself clearly and as objectively as possible through reflection and introspection. Actively try to step out of your comfort zone and see things from the perspective of people who are directly experiencing forms of oppression.
- 

## Promote safe and meaningful dialogue

- Set a goal to make sure all your working spaces are safe, welcoming, and accessible; allowing people to feel comfortable and with the space to disconnect from the challenges of their daily life.
- Pay attention to what others are expressing and don’t be afraid to ask questions to clarify your understanding of another person’s ideas, feelings, and points of view.
- Be sensitive and empathetic and prioritize this over extracting information from a person or interaction. If someone openly shares a difficult issue or experience, then don’t dismiss it if it makes you feel uncomfortable but support that person by acknowledging their situation.
- Pay attention to your words. Could your statements be alienating, oppressive or offensive to others? Do you hold power that may mean what you say goes unquestioned or unchallenged? Do you actively encourage others to challenge you and call you out?
- Be flexible and willing to try different methods to enable equal participation.
- Remember that creating safe spaces in dialogue should also include fun, enthusiasm and good humor at appropriate times, which can contribute to establishing a space of trust, community and mutual inquiry.

## Factor in accessibility and reasonable accommodation

- Be aware that you have a duty to take appropriate measures to ensure people with disabilities can access your venues, communications, and any information on an equal basis with others.

Adapted from the UN Intersectionality resource guide and Toolkit

- Put in place systems and mechanisms to know what accessibility, reasonable accommodation, and individual supports people with disabilities in your workspace and projects require in order for you to facilitate their participation on an equal basis with others. This could include adding questions to job applications, meeting registration forms and participant surveys.

### **Be sensitive to time and space**

- When planning and implementing programs be aware that your selection of venues, times and locations impacts different people in different ways. Take time during the initial design stage to learn from people who are marginalized about what issues and potential risks there are in your context, and how they can be avoided.
- If you're selecting a venue for a meeting, conference or consultation, consider the following questions:
  - Who is running the venue?
  - Who else is sharing the venue?
  - How safe is the area?
- Consider ways to make the space feel safe for diverse genders. Do surveys collect information beyond male/female binary e.g., 'self-described' as well as 'prefer not to say'? Is all language gender neutral? Are participants welcomed to share their pronouns and do staff proactively share their pronouns at events, in email signatures and meetings? If a space does not have specific gender-neutral bathrooms a temporary label can be made to signpost gender neutrality.

### **Consent must be free and informed**

- Building trust and safe spaces is contingent upon respecting people's choices and autonomy which is why free and informed consent must be integral to your programs and operations.
- Never speak on behalf of people without their free and informed consent. Likewise, do not take decisions on behalf of adults without their authorization.
- Be aware that some people with disabilities may have support provisions in place to assist them at times with
- When seeking consent to use people's testimonies, images, recordings, etc., make sure it is gathered in an accessible way, in the language used by the person.
- 

### **Maintain confidentiality and privacy at all times**

- Provisions for privacy, security, and safety should be equally available to everyone, so it is important you make yourself aware of your organizational policies and local statutory requirements that safeguard the privacy and security of people's personal data and ensure these are applied in your programs and systems.
- People are unlikely to disclose information to you if they do not feel safe with the knowledge that you will maintain their confidentiality and privacy, so it may take some time to build their trust first.

### **Ensure safe feedback mechanisms**

- Feedback mechanisms – which can process issues from general feedback to complaints and whistleblowing – have become commonplace as a tool for learning, accountability, and transparency.
- Good feedback mechanisms are diverse and consider user acceptability as well as accessibility, so that everyone is comfortable to share and feels safe to raise concerns. Different people have different preferences, so it is important to adapt to this and always ensure that mechanisms are available in local languages.
- Offer more than one feedback channel for people to provide feedback over serious concerns such as abuse, exploitation, violence, bullying, harassment, fraud, etc. and make sure people are aware of all the available options.
- Effective feedback mechanisms also require proactively seeking feedback. Many people experiencing oppression will not necessarily be confident to complain or may be too fearful of the repercussions of their complaint, especially if it is towards someone with power over them.

### **Be equipped to refer people on to support services**

- Depending on the person and their circumstances, oppression and discrimination can result in trauma and being in a situation of risk. It is important you and your team are not only sensitive to this, but also prepared to know what action to take if needed. Make sure everyone is aware of who your safeguarding focal person is and what their responsibilities are.
- If your meetings or workshops cover sensitive or triggering topics, it is important that the facilitators have planned strategies to respond to deep emotion if it emerges among participants. Facilitators must acknowledge the value of safe space and inevitability of emotion and be ready to talk individually to participants affected, offering them support in seeking further professional help if needed.
- Keep an updated list of local contacts ready in case you need to make referrals to psycho-social support services, medical centers, shelters, relevant police departments, etc.