

# Closing the Gender Gap: Women and Men Creating Social Change through Dialogue

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## ABSTRACT

Gender-based conflict, violence, and inequality are intractable social problems that remain a global challenge. This study proposes a novel approach to creating social change—engaging women and men together in transformative dialogue. The study posits that gender-based inequality is deeply rooted in social norms and that dialogue between women and men can expose, challenge, and transform these norms and spark personal and social change. The study conducted interviews with two women and two men who participated in a gender reconciliation dialogue called “Gender Equity and Reconciliation International,” a facilitated process of truth-telling, witnessing, and healing that examines the lived experience of gender. With the goal of identifying new pathways toward gender equity, the study found that gender reconciliation created a rare, transformative experience where women and men gained awareness of their unconscious gender assumptions and biases. Participants valued the compassionate, empathic listening in the dialogue as they witnessed the harmful impact of gender norms on themselves and each other. Gender reconciliation left a lasting impact: the women and men forged a commitment to gender equity, developed enhanced communication skills, and initiated conversations embracing gender equity in their communities. Rather than redefining gender norms, participants emphasized that gender equity begins with recognizing the impact of social norms, respect for the experiences of men and women, and compassionate communication. For the global work to eradicate gender inequality, gender reconciliation dialogue offers a strategy to disrupt harmful social norms and engage women and men to create new pathways for social progress.

**Keywords:** gender norms, gender reconciliation, social change, social norms, gender equity, dialogue

## INTRODUCTION

Despite progress on many fronts, gender-based inequality, conflict, and violence remain problems globally. As the 2023 Gender Social Norms Index reveals, gender bias, ingrained in cultural and social norms, underlies this endemic worldwide reality (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Unobe, 2022). Biased gender norms, “an undervaluation of women’s capabilities and rights in society,” affect men and women, as close to 90% of women and men hold gender bias attitudes (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; p. 3). Gender bias coexists with the global reality of gender-based violence (GBV), threats, harm, deprivation, and violence directed at a person because of their gender or sex (Dlamini, 2021), as more than one in four women are victimized by intimate partner physical or sexual violence (Equimundo, 2022; Gram et al., 2023; Sardinha et al., 2022; Keepin & Brix, 2022). Gender norms adversely impact men as well, as over 60% of men report “provider identity stress,” frequent

stress, and depression due to the lack of income expected of male providers (Equimundo, 2022, p. 63).

Men and women jointly inherit gender norms that impact nearly all members of a society (Equimundo, 2022; van Schalkwyk, 2022). In everyday personal, familial, and community dynamics, men and women experience, enforce, and perpetuate gendered social norms and “patterns of inequality” (Wall, 2014, p.5; Ridgeway, 2014; Munoz Boudet et al., 2023; UNFPA, 2020; Warren et al., 2023). Examining underlying social and gender norms presents the opportunity to explore beliefs, culture, accepted norms, and how they undergird problematic gendered constructs.

Global gender-based violence statistics and the disparate impact of gender norms on men and women reveal that while women and men inhabit the same cultures, a gap exists between significant, core aspects of their lived experiences. This study examines the impact of gender reconciliation dialogue in engaging women and men to raise awareness of this gender gap. The study defines and theorizes that the “gender gap,” the difference between the core, lived experiences of men and women in society, enables gender-based inequality to persist, as men and women are largely unaware of the actual impact of biased gender norms on each other. Therefore, this study asks: How can gender reconciliation dialogue, women and men together in a facilitated conversation, close this experiential gender gap, transform harmful gender norms, and lead to social progress?

### **THE NECESSITY OF WOMEN AND MEN IN DIALOGUE TOGETHER**

Practitioners and researchers recognize the importance of involving men and women in efforts to reduce gender inequality (Olowu, 2011). Practically, certain issues are addressed most effectively with separate women’s and men’s spaces and interventions (Olowu, 2011). Program H by Equimundo, focused on young men, effectively employed an educational curriculum and male-led community campaigns that shifted young male attitudes toward greater gender equity and reduced acceptance of domestic violence (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2020; Doyle & Kato-Wallace, 2021). Women’s groups focused on surviving intimate partner violence create safe spaces for women to share their experiences, heal, and be supported in moving forward (Evans et al., 2023). While targeted programs reveal the effectiveness of supporting personal change in women and men separately, the breadth of gendered issues underscores the enormous potential for women and men to dialogue together to examine gender-based issues. As dialogue is well documented to impact personal transformation (Nagda & Roper, 2019), this study theorizes that the gender reconciliation dialogue process can: (1) surface awareness of the gender gap between the core, lived experiences of women and men regarding gender norms; (2) allow men and women to examine social norms that underlie limiting, harmful gender constructs in society; and (3) as a result of dialogue, the awareness of social norms can lead to new beliefs and actions in individuals to create social change toward gender equity. Ultimately, the study seeks to understand how gender reconciliation dialogue impacts men and women and how it can generate substantive, lasting, and global progress.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL NORMS**

Social norms are the “informal rules of behavior” that define what societies expect, accept, or deem appropriate in social settings and contexts (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023, p.3; Cislighi & Heise, 2020; Guthridge et al., 2022; Bicchieri, 2006). Social norms are upheld by power

interests within cultures, those with social, legal, and economic power. Girls and boys growing up in a culture absorb identities, behaviors, beliefs, and roles that are internalized as normal, the way life is, and the way they are supposed to be (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023; Nartey et al., 2023; Iddrisu, 2020; UNFPA, 2020). The International Men & Gender Equality Survey, which analyzed data across 32 countries, found that children who witness male domination in household direction internalize this dominance and gendered pattern as normal (Equimundo, 2022).

Social rules exert power with social sanctions for not following the norms. People believe in social norms, conform to them, and expect others to do so (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023; Bicchieri, 2017; Legros & Cislighi, 2020; Anderson & Dunning, 2014). At the most personal level, the social norms affect the internal norm, what individuals normalize within themselves, and their beliefs about what is expected of them (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023). There are costs for not adhering to social norms, being, acting, and thinking differently (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023; Legros & Cislighi, 2020; Anderson & Dunning, 2014). When women do not conform or deviate from any number of social norms, they are more likely to experience social consequences, including violent threats and domestic violence (Gram et al., 2023). Women and men recognize the cost and risk of deviating from the social norms around gender. When people hold a high value on social approval or standing, the more people uphold the social norms (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023; Bursztyn & Jensen, 2017; Bursztyn & Yang, 2022).

Social and biased gender norms persist even among younger generations. The International Men and Gender Equality Survey (2022) found that while most young women have gender-equitable attitudes, young men sometimes do, but mostly do not (Equimundo, 2022). While the well-being of women varies from country to country, with women's greater well-being correlating with more democratic and peaceful countries, the widespread disparate impact of gender inequality merits a serious examination of underlying social and gender norms to transform this prevailing reality (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2023).

### **SOCIAL NORMS AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

A deliberate strategy to transform social norms can create change in society, as social change occurs when customs, demands, and policies "contradict the status quo" and "compete for acceptance" (Dobash & Dobash, 2003). Social change can be understood through a tipping point, where new norms become widely held (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Building on work by the United Nations Population Fund, *"A social norm perspective sheds light on issues that seem complex and sometimes intractable and offers insights that put attitudinal and collective behavioral change at the forefront of positive social change"* (UNFPA, p.12, 2020). Therefore, as social norms underlie gender constructs that can cause harm and limit the rights, opportunities, and benefits of all people (United Nations Development Programme, 2023), the study posits that gender-based dialogue can create awareness of social norms and generate attitudinal and behavioral changes that collectively challenge the prevailing status quo.

### **THE POTENTIAL OF DIALOGUE**

Dialogue, as it engages individuals at the most personal level, has the potential to uphold the collective consciousness of a society. Dialogue engages the power of relationships and can

bridge divides between people and heal and strengthen communities and cultures (Damberg, 2023; Delgado, 2019; Bubenzer & Tankink, 2015). In their review of programmatic interventions to reduce gender inequality, Guthridge et al. (2022) found that dialogue was essential to generate change in gender-based norms (Guthridge et al., 2022; Hwang & Wu, 2019; MacPhail et al., 2019; McGregor & Davies, 2019; Murphy-Graham, 2009; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2018).

Dialogue is an expansive discipline with underpinnings in psychotherapy, community development, education, and social transformation (Cooper et al., 2013). Dialogue occurs at various levels of human interaction, within the consciousness of self, interpersonally, and toward the purpose of change (Cooper et al., 2013). This research focuses on the potential of dialogue between men and women to affect social transformation.

### **PROMISING RESEARCH ON THE POTENTIAL OF WOMEN AND MEN TO IMPACT SOCIAL NORMS**

Research on bringing men and women together in dialogue and educational programming shows observable changes toward gender equity. At the youngest ages, engaging girls and boys in “gender-transformative programming” is critical to achieving gender equality (Nartey et al., 2023, p. 10; UN Women, 2014). Gender transformative programming modifies “detrimental gender norms, roles, and relations” and facilitates “significant reforms in power relationships between women and men” (Nartey et al., 2023, p.10). The Warren et al. (2023) study on a program in the Democratic Republic of Congo that integrated dialogue with men, women, and Christian church leaders found that participants rejected social norms of male dominance. Over a four-year period, utilizing study group circles with a feminist biblical lens to examine the story of Tamar, a rape victim in the Bible, the program outcomes showed a marked reduction in gender-based violence in marriage and a shift in familial gender-based roles (Warren et al., 2023).

As research documents the necessity and impact of women and men together in dialogue, gender reconciliation created by Gender Equity and Reconciliation International (GERI) provides an important strategy for research as it engages women and men in a facilitated dialogue to examine gender norms. Munoz Boudet et al. (2023) found that change in social norms can be facilitated in a safe space of “participatory and inclusive dialogues” (p. 14) where people can go beyond societal and cultural resistance to become “early adopters” of new norms. The collective space of gender reconciliation allows a small group of women and men to examine their personal and shared reality (Keepin & Brix, 2022). In research with South African students, van Schalkwyk (2022) found that gender reconciliation disrupted social narratives and beliefs that upheld “harmful social constructions” (p.351). The plurality of the groundwork on gender-based interventions suggests that social change initiatives must be anchored in the context of lived experiences, relationships, communities, and social norms (Warren et al., 2023; Somani, 2022; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021).

### **THE GENDER RECONCILIATION PROCESS**

Will Keepin and Cynthia Brix founded the Gender Equity and Reconciliation International (GERI) gender reconciliation dialogue as a process that brings all people together with full regard to their humanity, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation (Keepin & Brix, 2022). Over three decades, with more than 220 trained facilitators, over 7,000 people in six

continents have participated in gender reconciliation to examine experiences around gender, speak their truth, experience collective healing, and transform “dysfunctional gender conditioning into beloved communities” (Keepin & Brix, 2022, p. xvii; Satyana Institute, 2023).

To frame the research, this study refers to gender reconciliation as a dialogue process to situate it in the practice of gender-based interventions and scholarship on dialogue for social change. Gender reconciliation, created by GERI, is not a dialogue in the sense of exchanging ideas between people but rather is an experiential, dialogic process involving both speaking and silent witnessing (Keepin & Brix, 2022; Whitacre, 2008). Drawing from principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and built with the consciousness of love at its foundation, gender reconciliation centers the lived experience of gender to unearth the suffering of men and women due to gender oppression and conditioning (Keepin & Brix, 2022; Whitacre, 2008). Gender reconciliation is a structured, facilitated process with ethical guidelines and agreements for sharing, reflecting, and listening (Keepin & Brix, 2022). Drawing from the lived experience of participants, GERI facilitators use prompts and guide the process yet do not inform, evaluate, correct, or educate about gender. With its potential to impact gender norms and influence social change, gender reconciliation presents a comprehensive dialogue process for examination and research.

### **THEORY OF SOCIAL CHANGE**

To understand how dialogue that engages individuals could generate the complex phenomenon of social change, this study used a theory of social change, a framework for conceptualizing leadership for social change (Dugan, 2017), to guide the analysis. This framework shows interconnected change at three levels of human engagement—individual, relational, and societal (Dugan, 2017). For each level of the framework (Dugan, 2017), the study posits how gender reconciliation dialogue could generate social change:

1. Level One--Individual consciousness, alignment, and purpose: Gender reconciliation generates a change in individual consciousness, inner transformation, and awareness through the experience of dialogue, speaking, and listening.
2. Level Two--Relational, collaboration, group purpose: Gender reconciliation generates a change in the group consciousness through the experience of gendered realities and disparate gender-based experiences of women and men.
3. Level Three--Societal Values and Social Change: Gender reconciliation generates a change in social norms by examining gendered social norms and creating new awareness, narratives, behaviors, and actions that challenge and transform the societal status quo.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study conducted four qualitative, semi-structured interviews to understand and identify core elements of the experience of men and women who participated in the gender reconciliation process conducted by Gender Equity and Reconciliation International (GERI) (Creswell & Creswell Báez, 2021). The participants, two women and two men, elected to participate in the study after receiving a study recruitment notice that GERI sent to a list of former participants in “MeToo to WeTogether,” a gender reconciliation program that engages women and men in a facilitated, dialogic process, over three consecutive days in person or eight weeks virtually (Satyana, 2023). This study examined social norms based on the polarity of the male-female gendered construct and focused on the experience of participants who identified

as women and men. The participants all participated in different gender reconciliation sessions, from five to sixteen months before their interviews in this study. Each participant signed an informed consent form regarding the purpose of the research, publication, and dissemination of findings. The interview protocol was designed to examine the meaning of their lived experiences as participants in gender reconciliation, drawing from their experiences before, during, and after the dialogue process (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Each interview was conducted for approximately 1.5 hours via Zoom. In the recruitment notice, the researcher informed participants that the study seeks to understand their experiences and is not an evaluation of the GERI program. Participants ranged from 43 to 67 years old, all lived in the United States, and all identified as White/Caucasian, with two participants additionally identifying as Latino and one other as mixed ancestry. Their education levels ranged from high school to graduate degree. A pseudonym was assigned to each person to protect their identities.

The researcher conducted interviews framed by the following questions as a guide, with follow up questions to delve into the experience of participants as the interview unfolded:

- What motivated you to participate in a gender reconciliation process?
- What impact did the process have on your personal awareness, beliefs, and actions?
- What is fundamentally significant about women and men being in conversation together about gender?
- In what ways was gender reconciliation different, new, or similar to prior experience?
- How did the process impact you personally, relationally, and in your sites of interaction and influence post-dialogue (relationships, family, community, and leadership)?
- How do the participants interrogate, examine, and disrupt social norms around gender?
- How can gender reconciliation change social norms and lead to social change?
- What recommendations, if any, do you have?

The study conducted a thematic analysis of the raw data transcripts to examine the impact of participating in the gender reconciliation dialogue process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The core emergent themes were grounded in the individual and collective experiences of the participants in this study. The research analyzed these themes through the theoretical framework of individual, relational, and social change. The findings reveal themes across all participants identified as meaningful, notable, and transformative at the individual, relational, and societal levels.

### **FINDINGS: PERSONAL AWARENESS**

*"It created a level of trust between the speaker and the listener that I have never experienced any other way." – Irvin*

Three key themes emerged about the significance of women and men together in gender reconciliation dialogue at the level of personal awareness: (1) the significance of a safe process, (2) the value of speaking and listening to examine gendered experiences and shared realities, and (3) becoming equipped with new conversational skills.

#### **The Value of a Safe Process**

Each participant noted that the gender reconciliation process was a safe place for them to express their feelings and thoughts, which catalyzed new experiences for them emotionally.

They told their personal stories freely, heard all voices fully, and engaged in deep and profound listening. As the study sought to understand the significance of men and women together in dialogue, all participants noted that the gender reconciliation process was significantly different from any other experience they ever had. They noted the depth of which women and men shared openly, emotionally, and authentically in a shared space, which rarely happens.

*"The GERI process is really very interesting, the speaking and the silence, witnessing and creating in that safe container. In my normal, day-to-day life. I don't have that in my family; I don't have that in my school. I don't have that in my work and very rarely in a spiritual setting. – Neil*

### **Speaking and Listening: Recognizing the Shared Reality**

The participants shared the significance of being able to share deeply and feeling "honored" by the experience. They valued the experience of being fully present, sharing their truth, and listening profoundly to others. For all participants, the dialogue process was inwardly revealing and "cathartic." They noted that being acknowledged and heard was personally healing.

*"Being able to honestly speak about what our experiences have been like, both positive and negative, ...not only is it cathartic to express, it is amazing to witness."*  
- Neil

One male participant described gender reconciliation as cathartic, as he appreciated being able to share without interruption and express his experiences and feelings fully, without debate, critique, or any form of intrusion by the listeners. The gender reconciliation (GERI) design and guidelines created the structure for this experience as participants are guided to speak fully but do not comment or respond to other speakers so that they are only listening (Keepin & Brix, 2022; Dunson, 2024). As the participants freely shared, they left the gender reconciliation process with the experience of being heard and feeling their voices honored by others.

*"The cadence is different...you're listening to hear with your heart, and no one is jumping to respond with their mouths. It's a listening that is felt, not spoken, and it's awesome...it felt so weird for me at first because someone would share something and I would want to be like, oh, I get it. I'm so sorry...then the facilitators, they model it really well...they're just gentle and they're breathing. It's about the experience of the sharer, not the experience of the listener. And it's great." – Marlene*

In the gender reconciliation process, with prompts that generate conversation and reflection, men and women noted the theme of sharing childhood hurt. Participants noted how much they realized how their upbringing impacted their assumptions of gender norms. Family experiences arose as the shared common ground and reality, where participants recognized women and men are born into families and cultures, which impacts them all.

*"I never probably grasped as strongly as I did in this group how what we experience as a child affects how we act and who we are as an adult" - Angela*

The participants became aware of how cultural factors influence men and women equally. The experience of compassionate listening in gender reconciliation created meaningful connections to women's and men's shared experiences.

### **Developing Deeper Conversation Skills**

Each participant noted that they developed more constructive communication capacities and skills by participating in the gender reconciliation process. Participants left the process empowered to practice open, receptive listening and engage others without projecting assumptions. Both women and men noted how they carried their enhanced communication skills into their personal lives with a receptive openness to hear others. Notably, the gender reconciliation process did not “teach” communication skills. Rather, being enmeshed in an experiential, dialogic process, reflecting on their own awareness, and listening to women and men together imprinted a new way of communication within them. They carried the impact of gender reconciliation forward by engaging in intentional conversations and receptive listening, especially to the other gender or opposite sex.

*“I'm less apt to judge now, whether it's my husband or my sons or any male, where we might disagree, I might approach it a little bit differently...more willing to listen. I grew up in a patriarchal household, with a father who was very controlling and a mother who was very, for lack of a better word, submissive. I fought that image all my life, being very aggressive and strong...no one's going to use me, tell me what I can and can't do. Recognizing through this program, I don't have to be that aggressive in my approach, I can have conflict without being aggressive.” – Angela*

Gender reconciliation allowed participants to have a new experience that transformed their way of connecting and communicating with others. Participants emerged as listeners, initiators, and leaders of open, constructive conversations engaging men and women together.

### **FINDINGS: RELATIONAL AWARENESS**

In the relational framework of analysis, the dynamic between men and women, three themes emerged: (1) an egalitarian experience of gender, (2) unawareness of the other gender/sex, (3) being changed by feeling and witnessing the impact of harmful gender norms on women and men.

*“Confronted with information that contradicted my assumptions helped me to understand ways I was furthering harm with my assumptions and bias. None of that would have happened if they had not been willing to share their full stories.” – Marlene*

### **An Egalitarian Experience of Gender**

In the gender reconciliation dialogue process, the participants experienced an egalitarian experience of gender where women's and men's voices and experiences were equally expressed together. There was “no domination and submission” dynamic and “no hierarchy,” as one male participant noted. All voices were valued and necessary. The design of gender reconciliation (GERI) created the parameters to experience this dynamic, facilitating a tangibly new and transformative experience for participants.

As the dialogue process can be highly personal and revealing, the participants valued the “women only” and “men only” parts of the process as places where they could share freely, which felt affirming. All participants also noted that they valued the “men and women together” spaces where they experienced firsthand the emotions of men and women. Participants appreciated the “safety” in the gender reconciliation dialogue and “trust” that they could express their deep, personal experiences in a space with women and men together.

Participants noted that this egalitarian experience contrasted greatly with their past and everyday experiences. In dynamics and settings where women and men have unequal power and gendered social norms impact behavior, the gender reconciliation dialogue created a space that effectively disengaged power dynamics and centered only on personhood and human experience.

*“You feel someone else’s experience on their terms...you’re not using anything to even empathize with them...it’s very different because you can’t rationalize your way out of it or think your way. You stay right there in it with them.” – Neil*

### **Bridging the Gender Gap: Unawareness of the Other**

All participants noted they were profoundly unaware of what women and men experience differently from each other. Significantly, in the gender reconciliation dialogue process, they bridged the gender gap, defined by this study as the assumed knowledge that covers and obscures what men and women do not know or realize about one another’s lived experiences. The process surfaced an awareness that while men and women exist in the same spaces and communities, their understanding of each other’s experience is shallow.

Participants were universally surprised by the experience of the other gender. For the male participants, they were surprised at how sexist social norms and behaviors impacted women.

*“I lived with my mom as a single mother, so...I think I was pretty aware of the plight of women, growing up knowing about women’s rights...But learned on an absolutely deeper level...witnessing women tell the story of their gender experience as women. I didn’t realize to what extent women say they didn’t have the ability to have the same voice as a man.... in situations where there’s men and women and there’s somebody listening, and the male voice has drowned your voice.” – Neil*

The women were surprised by men’s emotional experiences and realized that men’s feelings had been largely stifled, not addressed, or voiced.

*“Listening to the men share about how the patriarchy harmed them...really allowed me to open my heart to the experience of how the patriarchy actually isn’t really good for any of us...these men shared about how they were emotional....men who were really shut down by their fathers or their brothers and feel like that part of them got driven out from a very early age...I guess I had never really considered the effects. I feel terrible saying that...the negative effects of the patriarchy on men. - Marlene*

*“I thought men could take anything, so I’m much more aware that men have feelings too...we do have preconceived notions of who women are and who men*

*are...hearing the men talk definitely shifted my thinking, and many of them said the same thing...they were surprised by what we shared and how it made us feel. It was a twofold thing. We're assuming they know how we feel, but we have no clue how they're thinking or feeling. That was an eye-opener." – Angela*

Significantly, the women and men mirrored each other's responses. As the women noted the surprising experience of hearing men speak emotionally, in sadness or pain, the men noted that they shared during gender reconciliation in ways they had not done before about the depth of their emotional, painful feelings and experiences. As men were surprised by women's experiences, including the impact of sexist harm, the women acknowledged they had rarely shared the depth of painful personal experiences with men or anyone. The gender reconciliation dialogue created a profound opening for unburdening where women and men benefited from deep sharing in community with each other.

### **Being Changed: Witnessing the Impact of Gender Bias**

One participant noted the transformative impact of gender reconciliation, as the process allowed him to feel the impact of his harmful ways as he reflected on his past behavior toward women as a young man as being primarily sexually motivated. While not physically forceful, he shared his mindset at the time—he was "persuasive" and not respectful of the woman's personhood.

*"It was a competition for me. We're going to make love, and you're going to like it...And the biggest thing for me when I got involved with GERI (gender reconciliation) was the shame and guilt that came up in sharing and hearing the stories of women who had been impacted by predators. But then the healing came where these women were able to forgive me, even though they weren't the ones that I've had the sex with physically...what the world was teaching me was inappropriate." – Irvin*

He became aware of his behaviors and their harmful impacts through gender reconciliation. Being in the presence of women who voiced their personal hurt gave him the opportunity and space to reflect and forge a new consciousness. His experience contrasts significantly with societal experiences in that there is rarely a space for men and women to deeply consider their experiences, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and possible impacts. By witnessing women's feelings and experiences firsthand, the men could feel the impact of women's lived experiences and then choose to act differently and consciously going forward. The gender reconciliation process engaged a relational dynamic of social change, engaging women and men together, which allowed participants to bridge the societal gender gap as they connected with each other directly through their lived experiences. For all participants, men and women, hearing the impact of discrimination and exclusion in each other's personal stories created an awareness of gender norms, differing gendered experiences, and the need for change.

### **FINDINGS: SOCIETAL NORMS**

*The best way forward is for us to see each other's full humanity." – Marlene*

At the social norms level, four themes emerged: (1) a new conversation toward gender equity, (2) the necessity of dialogue to close the gender gap, (3) the power of listening, and (4) the societal gap experienced after the gender reconciliation dialogue experience. These themes mirror and extend themes that arose at the individual and relational levels.

### **A New Gender Conversation**

The participants did not directly challenge or redefine gender norms or social norms. Rather, the participants reveal the need for, as defined by this study, “a new gender conversation.” While one woman acknowledged that “the patriarchy actually isn’t really good for any of us,” none of the participants offered a new specific narrative or redefinition of gender norms. Instead, the participants expanded the concept of gender equity by emphasizing that engaging women and men in dialogue through values of the heart—honor, listening, and respect for one another—is essential.

*“It’s going to be about vulnerability...about honesty, about openness, about trying to being open and trying to have the dialogue.”- Neil*

Gender reconciliation sparked a connection to the participants’ inner human values, which lie deeper than and transcend the dictates of gender norms and connected them with the humanity of each other.

### **Closing the Gender Gap through Dialogue**

Participants pointed to the gender reconciliation dialogue process, which allowed them to experience the profound emotional impact of gender norms, which are often lived unconsciously, as a way to transform gender relations in society at large.

*“GERI focuses more on the ‘we’ space. I’m going to share who I am with you so that you may have a deeper understanding of who I am and the impact of my life experiences on me, and you’re going to share with me who you are and the impact of your life experiences on you...It’s an opportunity to learn to trust and be trusted...It was a great awakening for me...the stereotypes that are imposed on us by parents, peers, religion, social circles...the impact on women and the expectations.”- Irvin*

The participants had an emotional experience of wholeness, as they noted “healing” in gender reconciliation, being fully immersed in the feelings of themselves and others through the dialogue that suspended the influence of gender norms, power, and institutional traditions.

The participants revealed that the gender gap is closed by experience when people feel empathy for others and witness and understand the harm of gender bias and inequity. The men and women experienced firsthand a wide gap in understanding their divergent, lived experiences of the harmful impact of gender norms and bias. Therefore, gender reconciliation participants agreed that dialogue engaging women and men to examine their lived experiences together is critical for social progress. After the dialogue, participants sought to uphold and share their new awareness in their lives.

*Interacting with men...hearing their side of the story was extremely helpful...it brought an awareness of how do I perpetuate a good gender image for my children and grandchildren, and how do I perpetuate bad gender perceptions with my children...the next generation is going to come behind us...are we helping them become better human beings or become worse. – Angela*

### **Communication: Listening Catalyzes Change**

For all participants, the experience of listening in the gender reconciliation dialogue process led to a willingness and intentionality to hear the experiences of others. Participants noted an awareness of their projections and judgments. They carried this human regard and openness forward to fully hear the perspectives and experiences of others in their lives.

This compassion and catalytic listening occur at all levels: individual, relational, and societal. Participants noted that their awareness and the communication skills they acquired impacted them beyond the gender reconciliation process and in their relationships, as they initiated constructive dialogue and actions in their community and professional settings. Notably, one female participant noted that she released her lingering hurt and gender bias resulting from difficult experiences with some women in highly competitive corporate workplaces in her career.

*"The lasting impact for me was to try and stay open with women in my culture and not assume that the women I run into are going to be these kind of mean girl bullies that I've encountered so much professionally...I remind myself there are amazing, gentle, lovingly powerful women out there in this culture...And to the extent that I have power, I am going to use it to do the exact opposite of what was done to me. Like the women coming up behind me professionally, I mentor...and make safe spaces...I'm intentionally trying to create and cultivate the opposite around me. - Marlene*

In his majority-male community group, one male participant noticed when men overtalked women and that he intentionally communicated to ensure the women were heard in that space.

*"I found myself where a woman would begin to speak, and some men would shut her time out...*

*Not puffing out my chest and coming in threatening and attacking...Time out. I heard her speaking, you might not have heard her, but I would like to hear what she had to say." - Irvin*

One woman felt that her new awareness and listening skills helped her holistically. She noted that as she had previously experienced overt gender bias with male colleagues in a professional setting, after gender reconciliation, she felt better equipped to acknowledge the issue and have a constructive conversation going forward.

*I've learned to not be quite so label-making in my own life and be a little bit more open to what this person is trying to say...They might be saying it with a little bit of authority behind their voice, but that doesn't mean that they're angry or upset or want to control me in any way. They're just voicing an opinion, and let me be*

*open...We're trying to achieve something here as opposed to, oh, he's trying to control me. – Angela*

With a clearer awareness of gender bias, constructive communication, and listening skills, participants were better equipped to initiate transformative conversations in their workplaces and communities.

### **The Societal Gap**

The participants experienced a dissonance between their new awareness and their communities, where gendered social norms remain the norm. After participating in gender reconciliation, they felt the difference between their inner transformation and the unchanged reality to which they returned, a gap between their new awareness and gender reconciliation dialogue experience, and how the societies around them and their members customarily operate. Yet, they felt empowered to lead the change through conversations with their families and in organizations, through their direct interactions and sites of influence, making an impact through social diffusion (Cislaghi et al., 2019).

*“GERI (gender reconciliation) taught me to be more sensitive and more aware of my impact and to listen compassionately...without judgment...I would encourage anyone to participate in it...it certainly has enriched my life on a personal level, as a result. Enriched the lives of everyone who I've come in contact with since.” - Irvin*

While they appreciated their new awareness, conversation skills, and personal commitments toward gender equity, they noted that they would benefit from being in a community that shared this new egalitarian awareness to grow the impact of this transformative work. Finally, they recommended that the benefits of gender reconciliation should be shared broadly so that people everywhere could participate, thereby amplifying the potential for greater social change.

### **ANALYSIS**

The findings overwhelmingly point to gender reconciliation as transformative at the individual and relational level of social change. Participants emphasized the significance of the gender reconciliation process in engaging women and men in dialogue as essential for shifting social norms. They noted that a “safe” process where participants feel trust is essential for a meaningful, transformative dialogue (Zielke et al., 2023; Damberg, 2023; Stains & Sarrouf, 2022). Gender reconciliation enabled them to examine unconscious beliefs of social norms through sharing their experiences. They valued speaking and listening to examine gendered experiences, which allowed insights and understanding to unfold that would not typically occur in daily conversation.

### **The Dialogue Process is Essential**

The structure of the gender reconciliation dialogue process, with skilled facilitation designed to engage compassion with intentional listening and speaking, created the conditions to spark awareness of gender norms and the resulting personal transformation. Therefore, as participants all appreciated the gender reconciliation process, skilled facilitation is critical to exploring the impacts of gender norms and the disparate experiences of women and men.

Significantly, the gender reconciliation process created a context to reduce potentially “polarizing behaviors” that create divisiveness and undermine understanding between people belonging to different groups and holding differing values and beliefs (Damburg, 2023, p. 37). Gender reconciliation dissolved psychological distance by engaging women and men in a shared purpose as gender norms equally impact women and men. Participants noted the impact of becoming immersed in another person’s story. In gender reconciliation, reactions or possible verbal expressions of “polarizing behaviors ...defensiveness, judgment, aggressiveness” could not be expressed, as they instead deeply listened (Damberg, 2023, p. 37). Gender reconciliation dissolved the “dualism” often expressed in social conflict, highly charged and vocal either/or positions, such as the rights of men versus the rights of women, and grounded all participants in “lovingkindness” (Rothberg, 2006; Damberg, 2023, p.37). In the dialogue, participants were allowed to feel and process within and thereby fully heard the speaker on their terms. Deep conversation, speaking, and listening without judgment were noted by participants as transformative and essential for change as they considered gender norms and the harmful impacts by deeply engaging another person and learning from their experience.

### **Enduring Individual Change**

In considering social change, when new norms challenge the status quo (Dobash & Dobash, 2003), the study found that the effect of gender reconciliation dialogue is enduring and long-lasting. On average, participants participated in gender reconciliation, a process of approximately 24 hours (three days in person or eight weeks virtually), ten months before their interviews in this study. Participants noted a lasting awareness of the need for gender equity that they incorporated into their lives and conversations with others, providing evidence that a lasting “beneficial effect” can occur in short durations in a process or intervention (Guthridge et al., 2022, p.326). The participants demonstrated and stated a commitment to open conversation, listening, and initiative to create change around them by catalyzing new conversations that uphold gender equity. These personal actions create the seeds for social change at individual and relational levels.

### **Closing the Gender Gap**

In the dynamic between men and women in dialogue, participants strongly emphasized their profound unawareness of the differing lived experiences of men and women. They emerged with a new awareness of how social conditioning and gender norms impact them all. Men and women shared equally in dialogue and reported being changed by witnessing and feeling the impact of harmful gender norms on women and men. The findings show the significance of men and women together in dialogue to create change as they explored their experiences and realized profound assumptions about gendered realities, which undergird and perpetuate prevailing social norms.

In the experiential dialogue process, the participants closed the gender gap—a space filled with unawareness and assumptions about how gendered social norms impact women and men in their society. The participants collectively explored the previously unexamined “interior collective of experience” (Friedman & Gordezky, 2011, p. 12) of the social norms and gender biases upheld by society, culture, and individuals. As van Schalkwyk (2022) found, gender transformation is possible when the invisible, interior assumptions and unconscious beliefs are made visible and conscious, and that transformation begins in the “sites of psychological

connection with others” (van Schalkwyk, 2022, p. 362). By engaging their compassion and witnessing their fellow human beings, the participants were changed in their interior awareness of gender norms and dissolved the assumptions that sustained them. They psychologically closed the gender gap by regarding the experience of one another, men and women, equally and fully.

Gender reconciliation can shift social norms, dialogue by dialogue, by creating an experiential, connected space that allows for intimate, personal examination with women and men where they jointly create a new lived experience and a new understanding of gender equity. As with gender reconciliation, research on gender-transformative approaches found that the work must be “gender synchronized,” engaging boys and girls, and women and men together, for transformation to be effective (Zielke et al., 2023, p. 16). In gender reconciliation, participants experienced an egalitarian experience, with no hierarchy, all voices and experiences, men and women having equal standing, contrasting the reality of social norms with varying expectations and conditioning of men and women in their cultures.

As with gender reconciliation, research shows that an experiential process, a dynamic interactive engagement, effectively raises awareness of gender equity (Guthridge et al., 2022; Zawadzki et al., 2012). Participants had the experience of witnessing harmful gendered impacts through the experiences of others in the experiential dialogue process, which is more effective in creating change than being informed about the problem (Friedman & Gordezky, 2011). Therefore, experiential dialogue between men and women enables them to create new experiences of gender equity together rather than being only educated or informed about gender equity and harmful gender norms.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EMPATHY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

The dialogue between men and women in gender reconciliation deeply engaged their empathy. Significantly, research has shown that engaging the emotions and empathy of men is critical to shifting awareness and collectively achieving gender equality (Guthridge et al., 2022; Zielke et al., 2023). The male participants in this study valued being able to express very personal, emotional experiences, including the impact of childhood hurt and pain. One male participant noted that as he grappled with the harm he may have caused women, his emotional awareness catalyzed him to make conscious connections to gender equity, make new choices, and initiate new behaviors. With gender reconciliation dialogue, when men can examine their roles in social and gender inequity, social change is possible (Zielke et al., 2023). At the individual level of personal change, individuals transform social norms by releasing existing, limited social norms and creating social change by “initiating new behaviors” and adopting new ways of being (UNFPA, 2020, p. 60). This study bore out the impact of examining one's roles in harmful gendered social dynamics, as both men and women noted that witnessing the harm of gender bias changed their awareness and caused them to act differently beyond the dialogue process. At the interpersonal, relational level of social change, as women and men were exposed to and felt the harmful impact of the gendered norms, this awareness diminished the potency and validity of the social norm (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). In gender reconciliation, the shared emotional space moved participants beyond polarized stances and beliefs that can exist in the status quo of society that uphold gendered norms (Guthridge et al., 2022; MacPhail et al., 2019). Notably, the relational dynamic of women and men together propelled participants to engage in a transformative manner beyond the process, disrupting

the status quo of gendered social norms by being conscious of gender equity and intentionally open to transformative conversations with men and women in their lives and communities.

### **Creating Connection and Change through Shared Values**

At the societal change level, the findings underscore the potential for a new gender equity conversation to create social progress. The study theorized that a new narrative of gender equity or new norms might emerge amongst participants in gender reconciliation. Instead, the participants emphasized transcendent human values as essential for gender equity conversations. This “new gender conversation” that emphasizes human connection and shared values to generate social change, which they experienced during the gender reconciliation dialogue, emerged directly from and was grounded in the experience of the participants (Zielke et al., 2023).

In questioning how to change the status quo of gender norms, the participants emphasized engaging women and men together in a dynamic of trust, openness, honor, respect, and compassion for the humanity and experiences of each other. This finding represents a powerful lever of transformation around social norms as the shared, emotional humanity becomes the basis for connection, engagement, and social change dialogue. To shift social norms, the study finds the significance of a dialogue process that centers the voices and shared humanity of women and men to disrupt the status quo and allow new experiences of compassion and understanding.

### **Being a Catalyst Beyond the Dialogue**

Gender reconciliation steeped women and men in an emotional experience, catharsis, and healing, which forged a new relational dynamic and imprinted within them transformative communication skills and in-depth, compassionate listening. When their underlying human needs, including the need to be listened to, were met, as in the gender reconciliation dialogue, new understanding emerged and the resulting support of social change increased (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2018). The participants left gender reconciliation with a desire to support social change and embrace values and actions that regard the humanity and needs of women and men in all settings.

Participants gained a heightened awareness and “critical consciousness of existing inequalities” essential to creating new pathways for social change (Hässler et al., 2022; p. 650; Vollhardt & Twali, 2016). This prompted, amongst all participants, a lasting new stance toward openness and listening in conversations with family, colleagues, and community. Therefore, in influencing the status quo of social norms, these participants catalyzed the disruption of culturally accepted ways of being through open and compassionate conversations in their communities of influence, relationships, and settings in which they have a voice.

Gender reconciliation catalyzed personal leadership through their new communication skills. Damberg (2023, p.97) found in a study of depolarizing leaders who build peace that their inner awareness, managing their “inner polarizer,” and communication skills are essential in their work. Gender reconciliation, steeped in loving compassion (Whitacre, 2008), left participants with a willingness to lead with openness and engage less in polarized gender stances, and as two participants noted, becoming “less defensive” and more willing to listen and hear.

Participants became catalysts for transformative conversations after participating in gender reconciliation.

### **The Societal Gap**

While participants noted their positive shifts, they noted a social gap after participating in gender reconciliation. They were aware of their changed consciousness and approaches, yet their predominant environments remained unchanged. They noted the need for support to build on their awareness of gender equity with people in their lives and beyond. In considering the potential of gender reconciliation, participants noted that the dialogue would be valuable for all people and leaders. However, they noted that it is a very personal and revealing process. Therefore, one participant recommended that elements of gender reconciliation could be incorporated into various settings, such as workplace or organizational initiatives, to address diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### **APPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Moving toward greater application of gender reconciliation, how can dialogue between women and men that emphasizes transcendent human values be used as a tool for social change? The GERI gender reconciliation dialogue process did not impose a belief system onto a person, community, or culture. The transformation and impact participants experienced resulted from a structured, skilled, facilitated process that examined their personal, interior, and collective experiences together. Introducing gender reconciliation dialogue and practices in multiple settings with practitioners at all levels, and especially leaders, can generate significant impact, as leaders signal “top-down institutional commitment” that gives weight to organizational and cultural change (Guthridge et al., 2022, p.327; Palmén et al., 2020).

Tenets of gender reconciliation could be incorporated into more spaces with willing participants to create opportunities for compassionate, deep listening, sharing, and examination of gendered realities. Practitioners working toward reducing gender inequality, conflict, and violence could incorporate gender reconciliation principles into their work, bringing women and men together in dialogue. In gender reconciliation, women and men collectively shared their reality and experience, resulting in a profoundly transformative examination of the unquestioned assumptions of social norms that impact individuals, relationships, communities, and organizations and undergird the social reality where policies are shaped.

### **DIALOGUE AMPLIFICATION STRATEGIES**

The gender reconciliation process generated change within a small group of people, which the participants extended through their personal leadership and communication beyond the process (Cislaghi et al., 2019). Therefore, the powerful impact of a small group of women and men in transformative dialogue must not be minimized. Rather, dialogue is a significant, essential transformative factor, as a change in social norms happens interdependently (UNFPA, 2020). When groups of individuals take actions beyond the process, they bring social change to another communal or societal level (Damberg, 2023; Marcus, 2014). This behavioral shift after dialogue, which impacts complex social phenomena comprised of various actors, factors, and dynamics, becomes the “emergent” pathway for social change (Damberg, 2023; Brown, 2017).

However, to facilitate greater social change, the benefits of dialogue must be amplified beyond the change found at the individual and relational levels. Participants called for support and ways to bolster the change they experienced. When individuals receive support from a like-minded group, and when community campaigns and media disperse messages of social change, this awareness can create opportunities for others to deviate from existing social norms, adopt new attitudes and behaviors, and decrease resistance to social change (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023; Vaitla et al., 2017). As a dialogue process is small in scope, social change can be understood through a tipping point, where new norms become widely held (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023, p. 12; Nartey et al., 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Therefore, as an ecosystem of factors influences, shapes, and reinforces gender norms, amplifying the positive impact of dialogue, which compassionately exposes and examines social norms, creates a lever to tip communities into embracing new, evolved social norms and social change.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The study yielded actionable findings for engaging women and men in dialogue to transform social norms, as the relational dynamic of gender reconciliation created lasting changes in their awareness of gender norms and empowered them to initiate change toward gender equity through conversations after the process. Future research could build on the necessity of the egalitarian process, the mutual listening and emotional engagement of men and women, and the impact of incorporating elements of gender reconciliation dialogue in various settings. This research would build knowledge of how trust, being heard, and listening impact gender equity initiatives, programs, and outcomes. Further research could examine how the change dialogue generates at the individual and communal levels works in a complementary fashion to influence greater social change (Guthridge et al., 2022). Finally, at the broadest level, research could explore how gender reconciliation dialogue could inform leadership and policies at the societal level.

### **CONCLUSION**

The experience of connection, women, and men together in dialogue, reflecting on their own experiences, and listening is a critical tool to facilitate social transformation (van Schalkwyk, 2022; Friedman & Gordezky, 2011). The study presents a call for engagement in deeper dialogue, engaging women and men to hear each other through receptive, compassionate listening. The study found that women and men realized in gender reconciliation that they had taken for granted and made assumptions about the experiences of men and women within their families, cultures, and communities. Their new open awareness was transformative for the participants, leaving them with a new intentionality in communication, especially listening, hearing women and men fully, emphasizing respect for all and what is possible in society toward gender equity.

Gender reconciliation exposed the gendered social norms that undergird the human experience by dissolving barriers of psychological separation between the lived experiences of women and men in dialogue. This study speaks to the enormous potential of engaging willing participants to explore social norms that are rarely considered or examined for their disparate impact on women and men in society. The findings suggest that the gender lens of structured dialogue should be more widely adopted in spaces where gender-based issues and perspectives are problematic and not understood.

While social change is possible, resistance beyond the dialogue process must be considered. When there is a greater social cost, people often adhere to gender and social norms (Munoz Boudet et al., 2023). Gender reconciliation, engaging women's and men's voices together, presents a promising strategy considering the reported backlash and hostility to some gender-based interventions that do not include men or boys and challenge existing, problematic norms (Guthridge et al., 2022). Therefore, the inclusion of women and men is essential for engaging in the process of transforming social norms.

In societies and communities where women experience higher rates of gender-based violence, interventions must consider how dialogue participants are impacted as they reconnect with their communities, which may hold varying views. How do participants view the risk and cost of their new perspective? How much does social approval matter? While the participants in this study were inwardly transformed and shared their new perspectives with others, they were aware of the social gap—the difference between their new reality and the prevailing social norm.

Gender-based interventions should consider how to address this social gap reality to extend the impact of the gender reconciliation dialogue. As the 2023 Gender Social Norms Index found, not considering social norms and the lack of gender norm awareness can cause failure to achieve results and be counterproductive (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). The transformative dialogue between women and men bridges gaps of experience and perspective and opens the pathway for constructive communication, influencing relationships and communities in which participants are members.

Gender reconciliation dialogue presents a valuable tool that works with programmatic interventions, community action, and public policy to achieve gender equity. Participants ultimately achieved reconciliation, a healing within themselves and between each other, as they surfaced harmful impacts of biased gender norms. As social change must be anchored through lived experiences, relationships, communities, and social norms to create transformation for individuals and society (Warren et al., 2023; Somani, 2022; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021), the (GERI) gender reconciliation dialogue process is a proven catalyst for social change. Considering the persistent gender inequality globally, the lasting impact of gender reconciliation and its potential for societal transformation provides both a process and strategy for the groundbreaking conversations that entire societies must have—women and men, dialogue by dialogue, creating gender equity and social progress together.

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