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Abstract

Women in American society experience high levels of stress and the resultant physical and psychological challenges. While leisure is often seen as a context for stress relief, a variety of leisure constraints make it difficult for many women to have this experience. A focus group was conducted with five women who are mothers of young children to explore the division of labor in family travel. This paper reports on the experience of participant empowerment, which occurred through the dialogue that took place. Findings from this study have implications for those seeking to empower people who experience discrimination and marginalization in a variety of settings. We explore the value of creating safe spaces and facilitating dialogue as a means of mitigating against alienation, enhancing community building, and creating solidarity.

Keywords

Satisfaction, Married women, Social aspects, Research, Family life, Psychological aspects, Families & family life, Gender equity, Women, Division of labor, Family, Mothers, Family travel, Family vacation, Focus Groups

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DIALOGUE: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE WITH DIVISION OF LABOR AS A LEISURE CONSTRAINT IN FAMILY LIFE

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In 1898, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, “The general discontent I felt with woman’s portion as wife, housekeeper, physician, and spiritual guide, the chaotic conditions into which everything fell without her constant supervision, and the wearied, anxious look of the majority of women, impressed me with a strong feeling that some active measures should be taken to remedy the wrongs of society in general, and of women in particular” (qtd. in Bohannon 37). This “wearied, anxious look of the majority of women” that Stanton described is not something confined to her day; it is also an accurate description of many women in society today. Women experience an extraordinary amount of depression, stress, heart disease, and other issues that influence their physical and psychological well-being.

Gender roles and the division of labor in heterosexual families typically result in the majority of daily maintenance tasks falling upon mothers. This is true even in dual-working families (described as the “second shift” by Hochschild). This burden of work on women in family life is also present in family recreation and travel. Mothers are generally responsible for the preparation, caregiving tasks during, and cleanup after family activities. Faced with these constraints, women often do not enjoy family activities as much as men. When considering the high level of heart disease, depression, stress, and other issues that influence women’s physical and psychological well-being, we can see that society

needs to address these concerns. The essay that follows examines the findings of a focus group talking about these topics. While our original study explored the constraints women experience in relation to motherhood and family travel, we came to see that the dialogue facilitated by our focus group provided a way to address the very constraints we were exploring.

WOMEN'S PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

This study began as a response to the unequal impact of stress on the lives of women. According to a recent report (Regitz-Zagrosek), sex and gender are the most obvious and most important health risk factors for women. Important biological, environmental and behavioral differences contribute to a variety of health-related outcomes. Accordingly, scholars have identified a number of health concerns that are particularly prevalent in women. Regitz-Zagrosek argue that, while it may be difficult to separate the influence of sex and gender, evidence suggests that sex influences health by modifying behavior and that gender differences in behavior can have a modifying effect on biological factors and health. Chandola, et al. describe the “demand overload” (1145) that women often experience. They indicate that the workplace stress that many women experience combined with common household stress results in demand overload which compromises women’s health.

Over the past decade, The American Psychological Association has released an annual report on stress in America. Each year, women have reported higher stress levels than men. This is consistent with Frankenhaeuser’s findings from a 20-year long study of stress in men and women in positions of leadership. This research focused on the demands of balancing work and family responsibilities, the dilemmas faced by a dual-career couple, and women’s difficulty unwinding after the workday ends. This difficulty may actually be a result of what Hochschild termed “the second shift.” She describes the second shift as the housework and childcare responsibilities that continue to fall primarily on a mother even after a full day’s work outside the home.

Speck describes one consequence of such stress, identifying it as a primary cause of coronary heart disease in women.

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in women and men in America (Speck). Each year, more women die of cardiovascular disease than men, and Speck describes how stress is often both a contributor to the disease itself as well as a trigger for a cardiovascular event such as a heart attack or a stroke. Regitz-Zagrosek also addresses the significance of stress as a cause of heart disease in women. Citing a report from the American Heart Association, she indicates that young women are the only population group that is not experiencing a decline in myocardial infarction (heart attack). This elevated risk for young women may have a number of causes, but Regitz-Zagrosek identifies psychological factors as important contributors to women's cardiovascular events. Stress is a key cause of heart disease in women, and Regitz-Zagrosek points to job stress and social stress as particularly relevant. Additionally, Chandola, et al. concludes that stress at home is a predictor of coronary heart disease in women.

In addition to measures of physical health, mental health factors have also been associated with stress. Depression is one mental health concern prevalent among women. Indeed, Regitz-Zagrosek suggests that depression is largely considered a female disease. Piccinelli and Wilkinson note that "with few exceptions, the prevalence, incidence and morbidity risk of depressive disorders are higher in females than in males, beginning at mid-puberty and persisting through adult life" (486). Griffin, et al. confirm that stress caused by household and family responsibilities is a significant factor in depression in women.

Researchers have identified many significant economic costs of depression. In a forty-year longitudinal study, Smith and Smith found that families who experience depression incur a lifetime cost of \$300,000. Scholars have found that the total annual cost of depression in America (as determined by lost productivity and increased medical expenses) is \$83 billion. Perhaps more importantly, the human costs of depression can be seen in those who experience it. These costs are recognized in feelings of isolation, an inability to enjoy life, great human sadness,

and—for as many as 42,000 people each year—suicide (Joiner, Kochanek, et al.).

In addition to these physical and psychological issues, women also experience detrimental effects of leisure constraints. Leisure constraints are described as those things that “inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure” (Jackson 62). Crawford and Godbey argue that constraints may also affect a person’s preferences for certain activities. They suggest three types of constraints that people may experience: intrapersonal (e.g. anxiety or lack of skill), interpersonal (e.g. conflict between two participants) and structural (e.g. lack of infrastructure or time).

More recently, scholars have suggested that people may experience constraints that do not fit within the existing taxonomy. When considering the societal pressures that people may experience to behave a certain way or participate in a certain activity, scholars have suggested that societal constraints must also be considered (Arab-Moghaddam, et. al; Samdahl). Many parents, for example, plan and participate in family recreation with a “sense of urgency” and are “purposeful” in “consciously and deliberately” planning activities with a clear outcome or goal in mind (Shaw and Dawson, 224). This can be seen in the mother who carefully plans a playdate for children so they might benefit from the social interaction, or in the mother who plans a family vacation with the hope that it will bring the family closer together or simply because “that’s what families do.” These women have been described as reluctant participants (Wright and Goodale) who engage in activities to achieve some societal ideal rather than to experience a sense of fulfillment or personal leisure.

One context in which women experience leisure constraints is during family activities. Describing the experience of women in family recreation, Larson, Gillman and Richardson suggest that a mother’s leisure experience may be more constrained than other family members. Mothers commonly manage the schedule and the time pressures of family activities. They are often constrained by the work and subsequent exhaustion associated with planning and facilitating family recreation

and family travel. Due to these constraints, mothers often find it difficult to enjoy these activities, but, as Shaw and Henderson find, they often do not decrease participation because of the value they place on family recreation. The purpose of our study was to further explore the constraints mothers of young children experience in family travel and what could be done to help them enjoy these activities more. Findings relevant to this question are presented in a separate manuscript. The current paper will focus on the process of empowerment that our participants experienced through the dialogue of our study.

Creating Dialogue through Focus Groups

Focus groups have been used to gather data in a variety of fields over the last century. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis describe how focus groups are useful when exploring “real-world problems and asymmetries in the distribution of economic and social capital” (887). Focus groups are useful when researchers are exploring a phenomenon or problem in which the participants could benefit from discussing the issue together, rather than in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. Feminist scholar-activists, among others, have utilized focus groups to explore and advance various issues and causes (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis). Madriz explains:

Focus groups can be an important element in the advancement of an agenda of social justice for women, because they can serve to expose and validate women’s everyday experiences of subjugation and their individual and collective survival and resistance strategies...Group interviews are particularly suited for uncovering women’s daily experience through collective stories and resistance narratives that are filled with cultural symbols, words, signs, and ideological representations that reflect different dimensions of power and domination that frame women’s quotidian experiences. (836-839)

Kamberelis and Dimitriadis note that focus groups are useful for women to both generate “collective testimonies” and help women “find or produce their own unique and powerful voices” (893). We believed that conducting a focus group would be the most effective way to truly explore

the constraints women were experiencing in family vacation settings, and hoped the participants would brainstorm together or learn from each other as they considered how to address the challenges women experience. As we concluded the focus group, it was clear that there were no immediate solutions to the challenges the women were facing in regards to family vacations. What was striking, however, was how much better the women seemed to feel from just talking about their experiences with one another and seeing that they were not the only ones who felt this way. As we watched the women become empowered to confront their challenges through having this conversation, we could see a perfect example of “the power of the dialogue” as described by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogies of the Oppressed*. We will discuss how the women experienced this empowerment through the focus group as well as the implications this has for us as researchers and activists as we consider how to create dialogue and empower people in oppressed situations.

METHODS

Sample

Five women participated in the focus group for this study. Since focus groups are most effective when they are composed of a relatively homogenous group of individuals (Henderson), we invited to participate heterosexual, married women who have at least two children, one of whom is five years of age or younger. As parents of young children ourselves, we acknowledge that being a mother of young children is a challenging life stage and wanted all of the participants to have this shared life experience. The participants all identified themselves as Caucasian and all reported a household income of \$100,000 or more. All of the participants had a Bachelor’s degree, two had Master’s degrees, and one had a Doctoral degree. Working status included participants who work full-time, work part-time from home, and do not participate in paid employment. While this is a relatively small sample, it is adequate for facilitating a rigorous dialogue between participants and ultimately reaching data saturation (Henderson; Merriam). Having a fairly small group created a conversational environment where the participants were

able to feel like they were discussing how they felt with a group of friends, rather than a large group waiting to take their turn to speak.

The focus group for this study was held with a homogenous group of educated, upper middle class, white, heterosexual, married women. The majority of tourism research has focused on this sector of society, and consequently the academic view of family tourism reflects this segment of society. Tourism was historically an upper-class activity and became common for middle-class families during the “golden age of family vacations” in the 1960s (Rugh), but researchers have not explored family vacations for families who have less opportunity and resources or are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Khoo-Lattimore and Wilson described the importance of moving away from a Western perspective of tourism and exploring the relatively invisible group of travelers from other cultures. Future research must explore the experience of family travel for women and families from more diverse backgrounds. We acknowledge that although this homogenous sample was useful in facilitating a comfortable conversation among participants, the homogeneity also has limitations.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through a purposeful sample of individuals that fit the qualifications for participation (Gentles, et al.). The focus group was held at a community center in a central community to where the participants live. During the focus group, we offered babysitting for children so that participants’ caregiving responsibilities would not prevent them from being able to participate. We attempted to facilitate an atmosphere in which the women would feel comfortable to speak freely, so we had the participants sit around tables that had been placed in a square shape, and offered refreshments and drinks for during the conversation. One of the members of the research team asked the questions and facilitated the discussion, and another member of the research team set up recording devices (both audio and video) and took notes during the discussion.

The focus group lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. For each question, all participants were encouraged to answer.

Questions that were asked included, “What do you enjoy about family vacations?” and “What is difficult about family vacations?” We also asked, “What could be done to help overcome some of those challenges?” and “What could make family travel easier?” At the end of the focus group, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. The recordings were transcribed afterward. Participants received a \$20 gift card to a location of their choice.

Analysis, Validity and Trustworthiness

A qualitative analysis was conducted to analyze the data from the focus group. We analyzed the data using open and axial coding (Corbin and Strauss; Merriam) and made an initial list of topics. Topics were then grouped into categories. We then wrote themes that synthesized the topics within a given category. Quotes were selected from participants that illustrated each theme. A concept map was developed that visually depicted the themes, and an overall theme was produced that synthesized the themes.

Steps were taken to increase the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. Member checks (Maxwell) were conducted with participants after the analysis was completed. Results were emailed to the participants and we asked if they accurately reflected their experiences; all participants indicated that the results accurately represented what they had said in the focus group and their experiences. An audit trail (Lincoln and Guba; Richards and Morse) was kept of all correspondence with participants, audio and visual recordings, transcription information, analysis notes, and member checks.

RESULTS

Although specific topics and themes related to the research question regarding family vacations were generated, the surprising finding from the focus group was the feeling of empowerment for participants through the dialogue. As seen in the concept map below (see Figure 1), participants began the focus group with the pressures of societal norms and the attempt to project a “good mom” image. Through the dialogue,

there was a breakdown of barriers and a freedom to speak that the participants experienced. There followed four resulting outcomes from the dialogue that contributed to the overall empowerment of the participants.

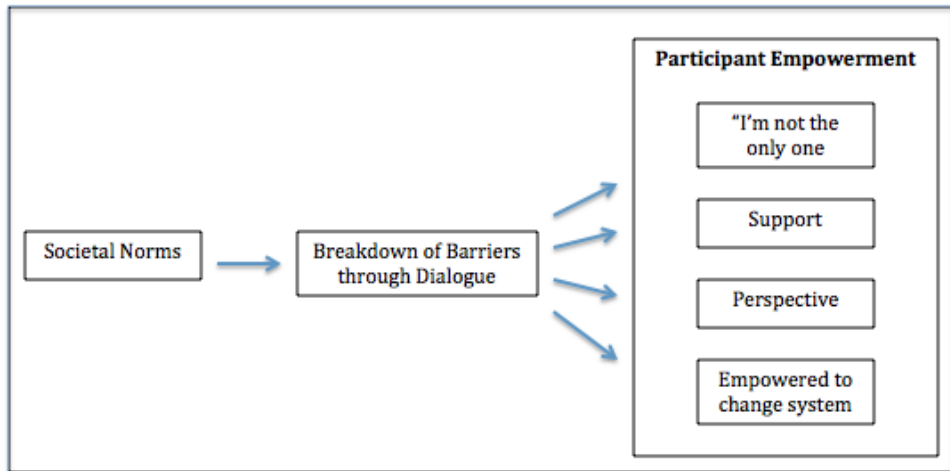


Figure 1. Concept Map of Participant Empowerment

“I’m Not the Only One”

During the focus group, participants were asked about aspects of family vacations they enjoyed and did not enjoy. It was interesting to watch participants begin to discuss certain aspects of family vacations they did not enjoy, as if they felt like a “bad mom” for saying some of these things. But as they discussed the stress they felt preparing for vacations and exhaustion of cleaning up afterward, the irritability of being around arguing children on long road trips, and other challenges, they quickly came to see that the other participants had similar experiences. The participants talked about how they had felt like bad moms for not enjoying certain aspects of family vacations, but felt relief to discover that the other participants had similar experiences. One participant summed it up at the end of the focus group when she stated, “This makes me feel like I’m not alone. I always thought I was the weird one, like some kind of weird martyr.” To which another participant eagerly replied, “I know! Me too!”

Although there seemed to be no immediate solution to the challenges of family vacations that came through the discussion (“It will help for my kids to get older”), there was a sense of relief and encouragement as participants were leaving the focus group that they were not the only one who experienced these challenges and felt these emotions. This feeling of shared experience seemed to leave them with a feeling of “I’m not a bad mom if I don’t always enjoy this family time,” because other women, who appeared to be good moms, felt that way too. Once they felt the freedom to openly share their feelings (that they may have considered socially unacceptable, as one of them said “I feel selfish saying this, but...” and another stated, “I feeling guilty saying this...”), they realized other women felt the same way.

Support

Similarly, there was an immense feeling of support among the participants. Throughout the focus group, the participants were constantly validating what the other participants were saying. They seemed hesitant to speak openly at first; one participant prefaced her thoughts by saying, “Oh my gosh, this is so selfish of me, but...” Their hesitancy quickly melted away as they saw the other participants had had similar experiences and emotions. Throughout the discussion, there were constant sounds (and laughter) of agreement. Occasionally other participants even said “Amen!” after someone discussed something about family vacations they did not enjoy. During the discussion, they progressed from simply answering the facilitator’s questions to actually having a conversation with each other, repeating, supporting, and encouraging each other. There were several times during the discussion that the group replied “Yeah! I know what you mean! Me too!” After one participant had discussed something, another responded to her, “I love that you said that!” At the end of the conversation, one of the participants thanked the research team for inviting all of them, and another participant said, “Yes! This felt like therapy!” and they all laughed. Although the participants hadn’t known each other previously, there was a sudden bond and openness that occurred through the

discussion, and a setting of support and encouragement that developed throughout the dialogue.

Perspective

During the focus group, the participants discussed challenges related to family vacations, what could be done to deal with those challenges, and benefits of family vacations. After the participants realized that the negative aspects of family vacations were a common experience among all of them and they began to discuss how to address those challenges, one of the participants stated, "It would help for my kids to get older." After the other participants laughed, another stated, "That would actually be really helpful." They discussed how parenting and traveling with their older children has become easier, and they seemed to realize that this challenging stage of traveling with young children would not last forever.

As the group discussed the benefits of family travel, one of the participants stated, "It provides me the opportunity to be the mom that I wish I could be every day." Through discussing the benefits of family vacations as well as the challenges, the participants seemed to come to a point at the end of the focus group where they recognized the challenges of family travel, but viewed those as being "worth it" because of the benefits gained from family vacations. One participant described an experience her daughter had on a family vacation and remembered, "To have that for her...and that is one of the sweetest memories that I have of her childhood. I'd go three thousand miles to have that moment again with her." The participants left the focus group with an acknowledgement that other women experiences challenges with family travel, those challenges will not last forever, and in the long-run those challenges are worth the benefits received.

Empowered to Change System

Some of the challenges related to family travel were due to the division of labor in families and the fact that the bulk of preparation and cleanup for vacations was the responsibility of the mothers. One participant stated, "The planning and preparedness really falls to, at least in our

family, the mom,” to which the rest of the group laughed and agreed. One mother described her exhaustion from preparing for camping trips, and how she responded: “The most challenging part of traveling is the prep work. When we finally did [go camping], afterward we didn’t go camping for so long because I was like, ‘I’m done! That was not a vacation for me!’ Then we started doing it again. I was like, ‘You know what, honey? You’re going to have to help.’ Because I think that’s what makes it so stressful for me. I was stressed out before we left the house.” Although another participant described the challenge she has having her husband help with the preparation work (“As well-intentioned as my husband is, when he says, ‘Can I help?’ it’s just more work to tell him everything that needs to be done so it’s just easier to do it on your own.”), the women acknowledged that having others share the workload of preparation and cleanup could lessen the burden and exhaustion they experience.

In addition to asking for help from other family members, one woman described how she deals with the challenge of being overwhelmed by too much togetherness on vacations: “If I go for a walk or a bike ride on my own in the middle of the day for twenty minutes, it’s not such a big deal...or I can go for a walk on the beach or sit by the pool and he [her husband] can, you know, do some more one-on-one time with them [her children] rather than me needing to. I find that to be very helpful.” As she described taking this time away for herself on family vacations, the other participants seemed surprised (“You can do that?!”), and said they want to try that on their next vacation to help maintain their emotional well-being. With both seeking help to share the workload and taking time for themselves, the participants left the focus group encouraged with ideas of how to make changes in their family systems to be able to enjoy family vacations more.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The dialogue that occurred during the focus group created an atmosphere in which the participants were empowered in various ways. Freire describes dialogue as being collective reflection or action in which is found great power for the participants. This “power of dialogue” is what Freire believed was so influential in emancipating and empowering people who are oppressed or disadvantaged. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis describe how Freire views dialogue as a means of fellowship and solidarity, which are essential to liberation and emancipation: “We can legitimately say that in the process of oppression, someone oppresses someone else; we cannot legitimately say that in the process of revolution, someone liberates someone else, nor yet that that someone liberates himself, but rather that men in communion liberate each other” (890). The women in our focus group gained a sense of encouragement and empowerment through their dialogue with one another as they shared their experiences and feelings. This sense of empowerment and encouragement, even emancipation from their previously held societal expectations of how they “should” feel is particularly important for women when we consider the emotional and physical challenges that women face (e.g. Piccinelli and Wilkinson; Regitz-Zagrosek).

As the women in the focus group felt the freedom to share their experiences and thoughts, they set aside societal expectations and judgments and were able to discuss how they truly felt, far more than if we had conducted one-on-one interviews. The atmosphere of the focus group was similar to what Lather and Smithies describe in their focus group with women living with HIV/AIDS: “The women attending this meeting were spilling over with excitement and ideas; their talk became a dialogue of issues and feelings and insights. Group process was producing a form and level of collaboration that could not be remotely duplicated in one-on-one interviews” (xix). Radway also discusses the group dynamics that can occur in focus groups and describes the collective energy of the group; this collective energy is the power of the dialogue that Freire indicated is critical to empowering and

emancipating people. The women in our focus group were empowered through the dialogue they had with each other, and this kind of dialogue can be beneficial in a variety of settings to empower people who face a variety of forms of oppression, discrimination, and disadvantage.

Freire promotes the role of *conscientização*, which refers to “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality” (35). It is the responsibility of those seeking to help empower people in various situations to look for instances where oppression is occurring in a variety of forms and empowerment and emancipation is needed. This “authentic struggle to transform the situation” (Freire 47) can only be done in partnership with those needing the empowerment. Sometimes this requires helping people see the injustices or inequities in their situation for them to view it as a situation that needs to be changed, which can only occur through dialogue. Freire states that, “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking” (92).

This kind of dialogue that compels people to action is what ignited Elizabeth Cady Stanton to fight for women’s rights. In both her discussions with Lucretia Mott in London during an anti-slavery convention in 1840, and in speaking with her friends in Waterloo, New York in 1848, the dialogue empowered Stanton and her colleagues to advocate for the rights of women. Stanton wrote, “My experience at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention, all I had read of the legal status of women, and the oppression I saw everywhere, together swept across my soul, intensified now by many personal experiences. It seemed as if all the elements had conspired to impel me to some onward step. I could not see what to do or where to begin—my only thought was a public meeting for protest and discussion” (qtd. in Bohannon 37). Stanton knew that a dialogue on this topic was necessary to create change and begin to emancipate women. She and her colleagues held the Seneca Falls Convention in July of 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, where they presented their “Declaration of Sentiments.” From this convention, the Women’s Rights Movement was born (Wellman).

Creating dialogue and space for conversation is necessary today in order to address societal injustices and discrimination experienced by many people. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis note the importance of creating safe and supportive spaces for dialogue (specifically focus groups) in mitigating against alienation, enhancing community building, and creating solidarity. As indicated through our results, focus groups can be a powerful forum for women to exchange their thoughts and express feelings. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis stated that, “focus groups afford women much safer and supportive contexts within which they may explore their lived experiences and the consequences of these experiences with other women who will understand what they are saying intellectually, emotionally, and viscerally” (897). They suggested that focus group meetings be held in safe spaces where women feel validated, comfortable, and important. Such settings are necessary so that people feel able to speak freely and engage in a process of social critique and social change.

Although the original intent was to explore women’s experience as mothers in the context of family travel and how to negotiate the constraints they experienced, the dialogue of the focus group itself became the means of empowering the participants. Our own experience at the Seneca Falls Dialogues as we presented this information was a perfect example of the issues we are facing in society and the problem in confronting these problems. Time after time when we have discussed the constraints mothers experience with family travel with *women*, the women nodded in agreement and expressed relief (as had our participants during the focus group) that they were not the only ones who had felt this way and had negative experiences on family vacations. Some of the women at the Seneca Falls Dialogues we spoke with said they loved hearing that this was a shared experience for women and wished that people could discuss things like this without feeling like a “bad mom.” However, when we speak about these issues with men, they do not seem to understand the problem or why this is an issue. One man in particular at the Seneca Falls Dialogues that spent time discussing this material with us questioned the significance of the study, indicating

this is just a description of parenting roles playing out on vacation. He seemed to not recognize how these “traditional parenting roles” represent an unfair distribution of labor and negatively impact one parent’s experience more than another. These reactions at the Seneca Falls Dialogues mirror reactions we have had in dozens of similar conversations, and further demonstrate the need to facilitate such discussions.

As we facilitate dialogue we can help change the systems that are oppressing women. We can and we must face societal issues and seek to empower people through mitigating against alienation, enhancing community building, and creating solidarity. We as researchers and activists must accept the responsibility to facilitate dialogue and create social change.

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