



March 2021

Digital Feminist
Safe[r] Spaces:
A Constructive
Analysis

Remarks from the author

Through experience and research, it can be shown that safe spaces as a whole, are not necessarily safe for people who differ from the cis-hetero-normative and patriarchal societal norms. Ironically, the spaces created to foster solidarity between the oppressed in a privileged society, have instead been founded on exclusion according to differences and reproducing toxic societal standards. The following document exposes the paradoxal tensions that exist in self-deeming safe spaces, and offers tips to ensure that every space is safer by being free of violence and harassment, in both physical and digital spaces. Throughout the entirety of this analysis, the term safe[r] spaces will be employed, as it is impossible to guarantee the space will be 100% safe for everyone, as safe is a relative and subjective experience. The current framework is drawn off of experiences and realities of 2SLGBTQ+ people*, a diverse group of peoples with a unique diversity of lived experiences concerning oppression, power dynamics and marginalization in physical and digital spaces. However, other marginalized groups also experience forms of exclusion which may be parallel and/or differ from those mentioned. Most importantly, the purpose of this document is to enable readers to question their social positioning and reconsider the ways in which they are contributing to the oppression of certain identities and communities.

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Definitions

Safe Space/Safe[r] Space

This term came to life during the second wave of the feminist movement, which at the time was still a very exclusive movement, with the hopes of creating a space free of harassment and violence, specifically for white women. These spaces offered the ability to mobilize resistance against patriarchal forms of oppression. More recently, this term has been adapted to safe[r] space, in order to better reflect the current multitude of experiences against oppression, marginalization and solidarity with the affected groups.

Feminist Agenda

The feminist intervention is built upon a rights-based agenda and powered by a structural gender analysis (Oxfam's Guide to Feminist Influencing), with the hopes of advancing the economic, social, political, sexual, reproductive and every other right, which have been guaranteed for men and boys, but not for women, girls and gender non-conforming people. The feminist movement has known three great waves which have all uniquely updated and shifted the feminist perspective to protect and address the multitude of overseeing power structures. In 2021, it is crucial to mention that the feminist agenda is not limited solely to gender-conforming women and girls, but represents a great diversity of bodies and identities that are collectively or individually marginalized by the patriarchal binary, cis-hetero norms and views.



Definitions



Intersectionality

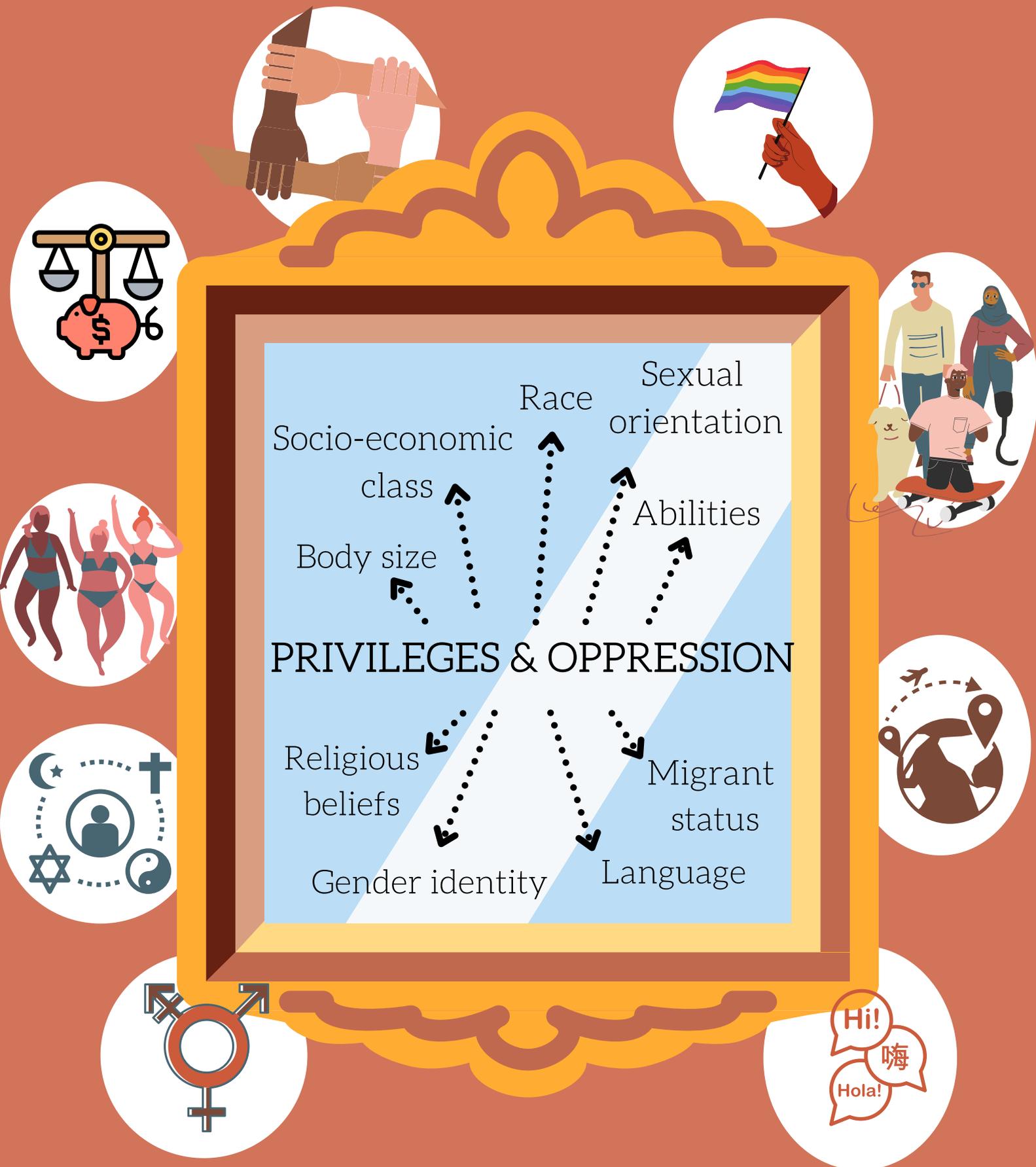
This concept also emerged during the feminist wave of the 1980's, and was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw to define the complex relationship between race, sexuality and gender. Today, this term is often used to analyze the power dynamics that exist in social structures and relationships, which considers not only race, class, sexuality and gender identity, but also body size, abilities/disabilities, religion, language, migrant status and any other form of privilege that intersects to purposely marginalize some groups in relation to others.

“A prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other”
(Crenshaw, 1989)

Anti-oppressive approach

Oppression is the use and abuse of social, economic, political and/or cultural power from one or more groups, in order to keep another/other groups in a position of subordination. Therefore, an anti-oppressive approach consists of actively questioning and challenging these oppressions and power dynamics, in both institutional and interpersonal relationships.

Mirror mirror on the wall...



When you look at yourself,
what do you see?

*Intersectionality is not
limited to these elements

Safe[r] Space as a Paradox

Since the beginning of safe[r] spaces, the concept as a whole refers to create a unique space which is supposed to offer its members comfort and security. Unfortunately, in the process of creating this exclusive space, the moderators are unintentionally - or sometimes intentionally - reproducing harmful social, cultural, political and economic privileges.

“My experience of a safe space ... was based on places secured by omission, exclusion or violence, and on my submitting to the limits of that place”
- Minnie Bruce Pratt

Most spaces that are self-deeming as safe, contribute to reproducing binary stereotypes about gender, sexuality, race, abled/disabled bodies, among other forms of oppression through the discourse and vocabulary employed. In an inclusive and feminist safe space, it's important to give space to a variety of realities and experiences to fully grasp the systemic root problems which feed into creating larger societal issues, such as the marginalization and oppression against certain groups and not others. The feminist intervention structures the institutions and the Westernized colonial system as the main character and common problem behind the oppression of multiple groups. By mobilizing people and collectives of a mosaic of identities, you are then able to understand how the patriarchal system affects each person differently, but nonetheless still one way or another affected.

Safe[r] Space as a Paradox

For people who identify as 2SLGBTQI+, these spaces are especially unsafe as they universalize the queer experience. While attempting to make spaces "safer" for this community, we are assuming that all 2SLGBTQI+ live the same experiences, and often assimilate the multiple pillars of oppression, which all uniquely and jointly operate to marginalize with different impacts or effects on each person. Not every queer person will experience homophobia in the same way, as not every POC* experiences racism in the same way. "Safe spaces" fail to acknowledge the complex relationship between race, gender and sexual orientation.



In your advocacy for a safer space, remember: The fight for equity and recognition isn't the battle of "us" against "them"; but instead us, as people in a society, against the social structures and institutions in power.

In many "2SLGBTQI+ friendly" spaces, with the intent of keeping the queer community "safe" from oppression, there is a certain lack of representation in the diversity beyond the binary. In that way, many people who self-name themselves queer-friendly use the image of a gay, white man as the universalized queer experience, and in consequence certain sub-groups of queer people experience *Gay Shame*. This feeling of shame, often experienced by gay white men as a repercussion of the denial of some type of privilege. In the same way, 2SLGBTQI+ spaces are designated to permit a space where the queer community can utilize their rights to the full extent without fear of harassment or violence. However, in this matter safe spaces are rather just a bandaid fix and doesn't actively challenge any structural constraints that exist to keep certain groups in this position.

*2SLGBTQI+ : 2-Spirited, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex

*POC : Person of colour

Creating a Safe[r] Space

It's as easy as ABCD...

A

Acknowledge
& Assess

Self-reflect about your person, recognize who you are, what your values are and what you believe. It is important to acknowledge the weight of the history of the Indigenous communities and the land on which the space is being created. Assess your privileges and social positioning, as individuals and as a collective and acknowledge that privilege and positioning is an evolving process that is dependent on the context and environment one is in.

Ask yourself the fundamental questions: Who are you creating this space for? Why are you creating this space? Where is the space, and what are the environmental conditions? This space is keeping members safe from who/what?

B

Break down
barriers

Identify in which ways you are contributing to gender, racial and identity biases/stereotypes, and challenge these ideas by actively fighting the institutional and social barriers which keep certain groups in marginalized positions and others in positions of power. The mobilization against social binary logics is also applicable in the terminology of the space. When adopting an intersectional and anti-oppressive approach, using "safe[r]" instead of "safe" space acknowledges that it's impossible to assure that the safe will be 100% safe for each individual identity, but rather that the group actively engages in assuring that if a member feels unsafe, their concerns will be heard and addressed.

What is your/your group's role in reproducing these binary logics?

Creating a Safe(r) Space

C

Collaborate
and create

Be an engaged participant in active listening and learning, guided by cooperation and collaboration. As a group, create contexts and conversations in which members are enabled to better understand the nature of their interactions, and the power all the facets of their identity holds. Develop measures and methods which hold each person in the group, and the group as an entity, accountable for their beliefs and actions. Co-create a framework which encompasses the groups strengths and limitations, in both professional and personal experiences.

How does your/the group's lived experience advance, yet nuance your social activism?

D

Define

Discuss the purpose of the group, by establishing a clear line between feeling *safe*, *affirmed*, *addressed* and *comfortable*. In the process of collaboratively agreeing on the purpose of the group, the well-being of all members will be centred in an intersectional manner and this will prevent the conflation between all of these feelings.

Safe - [To be] secure from liability to harm, injury, danger or risk.

Affirmed - [To be] supported by the approval, recognition or encouragement given by others.

Addressed - [To be] given attention or to be called upon.

Comfortable - [To be] in a state of physical or mental comfort, contented and undisturbed; at ease.

Which of these definitions best suit your groups goal and purpose?

Data Privacy

What is data privacy?

Data privacy refers to the use and storage of our personal information by companies and organizations. We share, knowingly and unknowingly, our personal information to all digital platforms and even physical ones.



Have you thought of your online presence and how much information you share?



Here are some resources to learn more about your online presence and privacy:

[Data Detox Kit](#) provides steps to control your digital privacy, security and well-being.

[Safe and Strong: the LGBTQ+ Guide to Facebook and Instagram](#) provides tips on how to keep social media a positive and safe(r) place.

Written by Ryan Yevcak



Keeping a Safer Digital Space with a Feminist lens

Since the official declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic, people all over the world have adapted to a dominantly-digital world, hosting and facilitating events, conferences and spaces on various platforms, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, Skype, etc.

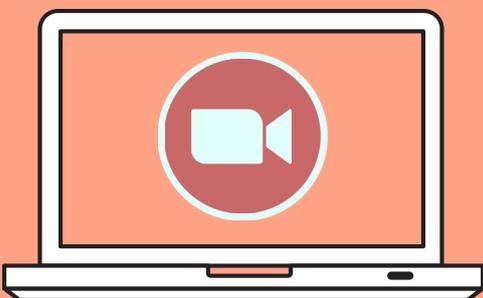
Many digital high-level spaces have been attacked by "bombers" with offensive and derogatory slurs. This can be very triggering for some people, and contributes to making your space unsafe for some members. Unlike in-person safe spaces, digital spaces are particularly vulnerable to attacks, and in consequence, require more vigilance and clear guidelines in order to assure each participant feels safe and included.

Bombers - People who join the space to disrupt intentionally, generally done by Internet trolls

"Feminist leadership is collaborative, participatory, empathetic, inclusive, built on consensus, transformative and most importantly, is about "power with" rather than power over or power under"

A few tips to keep your digital spaces safe:

Sourced from a Feminist Response to COVID-19 Collective



- Familiarize yourself with the platforms features (i.e ejecting participants, muting/unmuting, etc.)
- Establish the parameters of the space, introduce the moderators and the available features (i.e raise hand) to the participants
- Assure that the host(s) are the only people with the ability to 'share screen' and able to unmute participants



For more information on how to keep your digital space safe, consult this [Planning Virtual Meetings toolkit](#), created by WEDO and Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF).

Resources

Advocacy

- [The Future of Advocacy](#)

Anti-oppression

- [OCIC Anti-Oppression Policy](#)

Digital Rights

- [Data Detox Kit](#)
- [Digital Rights are Human Rights](#)

Intersectionality

- [Intersectionality, Explained:](#)
- [Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex](#)

Safe Spaces

- [Building a digital Girl Army : The cultivation of feminist safe spaces online](#)
- [\(Un\) Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in LGBT "Safe Spaces"](#)

Feminist Responses

- [Oxfam's Guide to Feminist Influencing](#)
- [A Feminist Monitoring & Advocacy Toolkit](#)
- [Feminist Response to COVID-19 Collective](#)