



TOOL: Creating a Breathing Space between Black and White

Sometimes what we see as insurmountable barriers to change in a community is the rigidity of polarized views – people who see issues in “black” or “white”.

We aren't going to be able to fix and reconcile polarities; we just need to be able to frame issues/challenges to create the space for dialogue and effective solutions/options. We need to learn how to acknowledge that polarized perspectives on the same issues exist...and that choices between those polarized views can be created, identified, supported and acted upon.

Some examples of polarized ways of seeing the world, or issues, include:

- Patriarchy vs. gender equality
- Elite group of decision-makers vs. wisdom of crowds
- Individual responsibility vs. collective responsibility for ending youth violence, for greening a community
- Companies are good vs. companies are evil
- Capitalism is good vs. capitalism is evil
- Sustainability vs. materialism
- Small independent retailers vs. lower cost big box stores
- We need energy vs. not in my back yard
- Gangs vs. no gangs
- Powerful vs. powerless

Here are some examples of how to work through these polarities to create breathing spaces, or openings:

A. Patriarchy vs. individual human right of equality

Patriarchal mullahs do influence/direct the age of marriage for girls. Yet gender equality supports individual choices. A polarity exists: patriarchal faith leadership vs. secular human rights.

By supporting a breathing space, a third party can create the space for options/choices between these two polarities. For example, in Yemen, the Ministry of Health identified health risks to young mothers as a reason for setting a minimum age for girls to marry and have sexual intercourse. This option would decrease infant and maternal mortality rates...an outcome that everyone agreed was positive.

B. Gangs vs. no gangs

Youth need to belong...hence they join a violent gang.

People in the community react by saying “no gangs here...gangs are evil.”

Another way to look at this situation is to understand the underlying drivers and influences and to talk about how these needs can be met in a non-violent way.

Disenfranchised and disaffected youth are joining gangs as a way to belong. The need to belong is a human need. But, choices have consequences. A youth can belong to a gang that is violent, or a youth can choose to belong to a group of youth leaders in the community who want to cause positive change. The need to belong can be guided for good or bad.

C. Powerless vs. powerful

Polarities can be created by “victims” perceiving themselves as powerless and their situations as hopeless.

In Yemen: females can feel like victims; the poor can be seen as victims

In Aboriginal Canada: indigenous peoples can see themselves ostracized as victims; victims of abuse; victims of colonization

As long as an individual sees himself or herself as powerless and incapable of making a change, then they stay stuck in the victim place. We need to work hard to identify options.

D. Clash of civilizations theory: Extreme fundamentalism vs. “the secular world”

Benazir Bhutto wrote about this polarity in her book, **Reconciliation**. She talked a lot about how to create breathing spaces between these polarized world views.