

## Names Can Deeply Wound Me

**Mary:** Words matter.

In their paper, *The Power of Language to Create Culture*, Carmen Bowman et al state that “we have seen how words matter and can be sources of both good and harm. What a person is called creates expectations about their behaviour and sets the limits on how much growth and individual identity is deemed possible by those who serve them.”

This past November, the Women’s Interval Home unveiled a collaborative and performative artwork called the “Fence Project”. This project was the result of many lengthy discussions over gallons of coffee between myself and Jennifer Vansteenkiste, Executive Director of the Women’s Interval Home. Jennifer was looking for a way to transform their annual “Walk A Mile” event which had traditionally featured men walking a “mile” in red, high-heeled shoes to raise awareness about domestic violence. Jennifer was looking for a more impactful and regenerative way of bringing the issue to public attention. She felt that incorporating a community artwork into the event as a central focus would be a perfect way to deepen the discussion. I told her about an art project that I had been planning and we discussed ways in which we could turn this art project into an impactful work that we could use for the event. The final product has a lot of elements from my original idea—the bodice and the fence; however, the conceptual framework that integrated language and symbolic elements like the keys would not have been the same had it not been for Jennifer’s contributions to the discussion. Her background in gender studies and her work on the front lines were essential to the growth of the idea. This is how collaborative art works. To do work like this, the artist needs to let go of ownership of the piece and allow other voices to shape it. In this case, Jennifer was instrumental in shaping the piece conceptually. Then, the community took the artwork over and gave it a new, unique form.

Through the *Fence Project*, we highlight the role that language plays in perpetuating violence and unhealthy power imbalances in domestic and workplace relationships. Although the project began with a spotlight on domestic violence affecting women, it soon broadened its scope to encompass people affected by gender-based violence, colonial violence impacting Black and Indigenous women of colour, and harassment due to sexual identity targeting gender diverse communities.

**Jennifer** talks about the current situation/what she has experienced/language...etc.

**Mary:** We are now going to talk about the artwork itself. To me, the dress form is a powerful symbol for many reasons. It represents the bodies of those who are victims of gender-based violence. It represents the power and influence of the fashion industry and social ‘norms’ that over-focus on one’s appearance. It also represents the emotive part of the human body. It is a torso and thus contains the heart and lungs, the digestive and reproductive systems. So often we separate our hearts from our heads. By focusing on this portion of the body, we are accessing that which is intuitive, creative, and regenerative.

A papier-mâché outer skin (a shirt) is applied to the form. The shirt has a sash that is covered in hooks and in pieces of flyers from the Women’s Interval Home.

For two weekends leading up to “Walk a Mile”, community members hosted by partner organizations and businesses were encouraged to use a sharpie to write on 8 or 10’ segments of

snow fence or to write on tags that were to be attached to the snow fence. They inscribed language that has been used as barriers to keep them from achieving their dreams, goals, or potential or that keep them from living a safe life. We were particularly interested in receiving statements that encompassed gender-based violence, colonial violence impacting Black and Indigenous women of colour, and harassment due to sexual identity targeting gender diverse communities. The fence segments were collected and used for the public performance on November 20.

Many of the segments with statements written on them were then cut into 12"X12" squares for walkers at the mall to carry on the day of the event.

**Jennifer:** On the day of "Walk A Mile", the dress form with the shirt was placed in Lambton Mall with snow fence wrapped around it to "fence it in". This was symbolic of the way that feminine energy and potential is fenced in or barricaded by the systems that are in place to keep us small. The visual image is one of imprisonment or containment.

After the speeches, the bodice was removed from behind the fence, a symbolic act which signalled the start of the walk.

Walkers each carried a piece of fence for the mile. At the end of the first half of the journey, the pieces were disposed of. A cedar ceremony of cleansing was performed. This was led by Aamjiwnaang's Mike Plain. Twin girls, Audrey and Bella (also from Aamjiwnaang) sang the "Strong Woman Song" at this point.

Once walkers had disposed of the fence fragments and the negative statements, they were invited to write out new, transformative statements on tags that were provided at the halfway point. They also took a key with them back to the bodice to hang up with each positive statement at the end of the journey. The keys represent unlocking new ways to move forward. Once the sash was covered in keys and tags with empowering language, the first part of the artwork was complete; thus signalling the end of the "Walk A Mile" event and the beginning of new ways of thinking (free from destructive power structures) and interacting with others.

**Mary:** After the "Walk A Mile" event, the bodice and fence pieces were displayed in a store window at Lambton Mall. This was the first of four locations for display of the piece. Each time, the bodice was displayed along with the fence and the negative statements. The keys and tags with positive statements were displayed towering over the fence.

The second location was the John Howard Society, where the Sarnia-Lambton Alliance Against Hate is located. The bodice stood in a bay window overlooking the sidewalk. It attracted a lot of attention there and stimulated conversation. The Sarnia-Lambton Alliance Against Hate has also planned an event around the artwork for March 21 at the Lawrence House.

The third location was Diversity Ed on Christina Street. Once again, the bodice faced onto the street to attract the attention of passers-by. This time, people interacted directly with the bodice. Groups who met at Diversity Ed had conversations around language that marginalizes and is abusive to people in the LGBTQ+ communities. Participants added such messages to the fence and then they wrote transformative statements on tags to attach to the bodice with more keys.

## FENCE PERFORMANCE: Part 1

**Jennifer:** We are now going to share with you some of the statements that were written on the fence pieces. The statements fell into two categories: direct cries for help or expressions of despair, and representations of abusive or belittling language used against the writers by people in their households or in positions of power.

We want to warn you that some of these statements may be triggering.

We are going to start by reading statements of the first type—cries for help or expressions of despair.

Jennifer and Mary alternate:

I always feel like I have something to prove.

My culture is not your costume.

I am multilingual but am bullied for my accent when I speak English.

People walk past my husband abusing me.

I can't walk alone at night.

No one's listening.

Not letting someone see family

Gaslighting

I am not what I wear!

Scared to work alone in office.

Sexual harassment on public transit.

Abuse to wives is tolerated in my culture.

I hate my body.

You can't be hot and smart.

I feel trapped in my home.

I go to school hungry.

No one believes me.

I'm embarrassed to get help for my drinking.

My pronouns are not respected and used.

My children feel unsafe at school.

I feel unsafe on the bus.

I am scared.

Raised in a home of abuse.

I feel unloved.

Walking on eggshells at home.

I'm scared to ask for help.

I can't afford medication I need.

Home is not a safe place for me.

**Mary:** For this next part of the performance, I will be sharing more statements that were written on the fence pieces. These statements reflect the abusive or belittling language used against the writers by people in their households or in positions of power. Afterwards, Jennifer will read many of the positive statements that were written on the labels and hung with keys on the sash of the bodice.

## **FENCE PERFORMANCE: Part 2**

Mary will read the negative statements.  
Jennifer will read the positive statements.

**Again, I would like to warn that these statements could be triggering.**

You're a waste of life.  
Welfare bum  
trash

You're dumb  
You're stupid.  
You're lazy  
Being a mom isn't a job.

Go back where you came from.  
Know your place.

Bitch  
You're going to be alone forever.

You're so dramatic.  
Women are irrational.  
Stop being so emotional.  
Your life is always drama!  
Go run to your mommy  
Calm down!  
You must be on your period.  
Someone's a bit sensitive today.

It's a good thing you're pretty.  
You want attention dressing that way.  
You'd be prettier if you smiled.  
You look fat!  
You're too skinny.  
You let yourself go after the kids.  
Your screeching voice

Boys will be boys.  
I'm the MAN of the house.  
A man needs to be 'manly'.  
Women belong in the kitchen  
You asked for it.

Can't you take a joke?  
Just kidding.

You can't raise kids without a man.

Every woman needs a man.  
Fag

older aged women are unappealing.  
You should be seen and not heard.

You screwed up again.  
You're useless  
Before I came along you were nothing.  
Everybody hates you.  
Can't you do anything right?  
If you loved me, you would let me.  
No one else will want you.

It's your fault I cheated.  
Your voice doesn't matter.  
Who's going to believe you?  
I'll get the kids.  
Where would you go?  
I'll find you.

You will never amount to anything.  
I'm doing it for your own good.  
You are making things up.  
You are lucky to have a job.  
Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

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**Jennifer:**

Your body enables you.  
Love and value yourself.  
You are safe here.  
You are valuable.  
You deserve to be heard.  
You are valid.  
Your feelings are valid.  
You matter.  
Feel strong.  
You have worth.  
Be true to you.  
You are brave!  
You've got this.  
You are loved.  
You are strong.  
You are powerful.  
You are enough  
Ask for help.

You deserve to feel loved.  
Love and value yourself.  
Let's hear you roar!  
Change with the smallest step.  
Resilience  
You are not crazy.  
Love yourself. Ask for help.

**Mary:** Open up for discussion.  
What did you notice about the positive statements?  
Onus on the women.  
Not solutions.  
Where is the voice of the abuser?

"Whatever the problems faced by women or girls, the implied diagnosis offered is typically the same: She just needs to believe in herself. (We use women to include all who identify as such, including trans and gender-nonconforming individuals.) Inequality in the workplace? Female employees need to lean in. Eating disorders and poor body image? Girls' empowerment programs are the solution. Parenting problems? Let's make moms feel more self-assured so they can raise confident kids. Sex life in a rut? Well, loving yourself is "the new sexy!" Each of these messages reframes features of our unequal society as individual problems; according to confidence culture, we need to change women, not the world." *How Confidence Became a Cult*, by Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill, printed in *The Atlantic*, MARCH 7, 2022.

So we must be careful not to put the onus on the victims of abusive language to do all of the work to make the changes they so desperately need in their lives. That is precisely what statements that are intended to bolster self-esteem can do. Not that these are not good statements. It is important to encourage one another. It's just that simply leaving it at that does not address the larger, systemic failings that lead to people feeling unsafe in their homes, their workplaces, and their communities.

### **FENCE PERFORMANCE: Part 3**

**So where does this leave us? What about the fence?**

**Jenn:** We need to make a cut between the false body images that society perpetuates. **CUT**

**Mary:** We need to cut ourselves free from stereotypical gender roles. **CUT**

**Jenn:** When political, economic, and social structures are used to marginalize people, we need to cut ourselves loose from them. **CUT**

**Mary:** We are allowed to cut ourselves free. **CUT**

**Jennifer:** The language we use is a symptom of a much bigger problem. And words do matter. None of us can be healthy unless we live in a community that is healthy. Healthy for all of us. People say that change is risky. But is it, really? What is change but the act of building on our knowledge? Some of our structures need to change—and changes are in the works. For example, everyone is asked to take equity and diversity training in the workplace. It may not feel like it for

some, but we all stand to win from this. But change is slow, so what if we start to make our own changes in small ways—beginning with language? Language has the power to change the way we view each other. Language shapes the storyline.

**Mary:** So, what if our language revolved around:

(alternate, starting with Mary:)

acceptance instead of judgment? **CUT**

active and mindful listening? **CUT**

intentional tenderness? **CUT**

opening our minds to new perspectives? **CUT**

learning what the resources are so we can be a resource? **CUT**

asking how we can help instead of thinking we know all the answers? **CUT**

respecting one another's point of view? **CUT**

defaulting to empathy instead of defaulting to defensiveness? **CUT**

being okay not knowing how to fix it? **CUT**

seeking out the threads that connect us? **CUT**

walking in one another's shoes? **CUT**

**Mary:** Thanks to my daughter-in-law, Lenzi Abma for helping us with the symbolic destruction of the fence. She has been helpful from the beginning of this project, helping with the paper maché, modelling for the advertisement that was shown at SWIFF, and providing insights on the power of language.

**Jennifer:** By cutting the fence, we have merely cut an opening. The pieces are still there.

**Mary:** The bodice, representing all of us, stands tall and rises like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes. It is an image that I hope we can all keep in our mind's eye as we continue to navigate the difficult waters of seeking inclusivity, respect, and love for all members of our community.

**Jennifer:** We have a handout that we encourage everyone to take with them. It is a list of ways in which we can reframe our language in positive ways.

**Mary:** One of the suggestions on the list is that we learn what the resources are so we can be a resource to others. I want to mention that we will be providing an opportunity for people to do just that tomorrow morning, from 9-noon. The Lawrence House is not usually open at that time; however, tomorrow, March 21, the community is invited to come here and meet with members of

Sarnia-Lambton Alliance Against Hate and Diversity Ed for a conversation around the supports that are available in this community and about how Sarnia/Lambton can become a more inclusive community. I will be here as well to talk briefly and answer questions about the art work. It will be an open house with short talks on the hour.

**Jennifer:** Anything else you would like to say?