
Film Review: *Women Talking* by Sarah Polley

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The title *Women Talking* initially comes off as passive. However, the women featured in this story are actually working to put words into action after a shocking revelation about the strange and violating experiences all female-bodied residents of an isolated Mennonite community have been waking up to for years. When seeking explanations, the male elders of the colony gaslight the women by attributing the assaults to Satan, ghosts, bids for attention, or hysterical female imagination. Finally, one of the men is caught in the act and gives up the names of the other perpetrators while revealing the use of cow tranquilizer to pull off the attacks. During the two days while the male perpetrators are jailed in the city, the women are left behind at the colony. They are told to use this time to forgive the attackers or be banished from the colony. Their banishment also means being barred from heaven due to their unforgiveness. Instead, the women decisively use this time to host a referendum, which leads to talking out a tie between choosing to stay and fighting or leaving the colony.

Canadian director (and former child actor) Sarah Polley won the Academy Award, Critics' Choice Award, and Writers Guild of America Award for "Best Adapted Screenplay" for her screen adaptation of *Women Talking* (2022) based on the 2018 novel of the same name by award-winning Canadian writer Miriam Toews. The writing motivation for Toews was partly inspired by actual events in a Bolivian Mennonite colony paired with the questioning that had built up during her time growing up in a Canadian Mennonite colony. While the sexual assault did not happen in her own colony, the circumstances of patriarchal power dynamics could have easily led to such a situation.

Women Talking is sociologically relevant because the entire story hinges on women who have essentially been trapped in an extreme societal construct of a religious colony coming to terms with the reality of the power dynamics of abuse that they had all been subjected to. The narrator of the film specifically notes that this restrictive community does not talk about women's

bodies, so there is no language for violation which leaves a horrific gaping silence that erases any chance of empowerment. Additionally, one of the women is considered a spinster but is carrying a child as a byproduct of the sexual assaults. At one point, she articulates that she chooses to remain single to be true to herself – a surprising act of autonomy and empowerment for a woman raised under strong indoctrination. The takeaway implied is that if the parameters of the societally constructed concept of being a spouse do not allow you to be yourself, then do not settle for betraying your true self.

The idea of forced forgiveness not being true forgiveness is a central theme throughout the film. This includes the men threatening the women with banishment and eternal damnation if they are not ready to forgive the perpetrators and live alongside them. Additionally, one of the women has been subjected to domestic abuse but all the while was advised by the elders, including the matriarchs, to forgive her husband. Her bitterness, fear, and resignation act as foil to the other women throughout the heated discussions. Another theme is power, with one woman specifying that the men want power and therefore need people to have power over, in this case the women. This also speaks to the internalized misogyny of patriarchal culture that enlists women in keeping their fellow women down and subservient.

When the woman who has been subjected to domestic abuse wonders if the imprisoned men might not even be guilty, one of the other women proposes the idea that the conditions set up by the men of the colony led to the circumstances perpetuated by the men. In that case, everyone in the colony are victims of the system. Later on, concerns about the logistics of choosing departure separating them from the boys leads to conversation over "not all men" being evil. They also discuss at what point in time do boys become men who become perpetrators. One of the women has a panic attack during this debate over whether males can join their exodus, which leads to her sister accusing this behavior of being attention seeking. The woman explains that the gaslighting making her disbelieve her own self is personally the worst part for her to wrestle with from the trauma.

I appreciate the decision made by director Sarah Polley to purposefully not show any of the men's faces. Any scenes that

include the perpetrators and enabling adult males of the colony are framed in ways that leave the men undistinguishable. The women and their passion are the main focus here. However, one of the other qualms I had with the film was trouble keeping track of who everyone was until about halfway through. The majority of the screentime is focused on eight women from two households. It was confusing figuring out the relationships between the two elder matriarchs, the four middle aged women, and the two teenagers.

The movie also includes a transgendered character: Melvin played by nonbinary actor August Winter. The narrator explains it was later on that Melvin reveals it was not the sexual assault that "turned" him into a man, but that this led to undeniable proof that he had never felt like a woman. After being impregnated (possibly by their own brother) and suffering a miscarriage of the baby due to malformations, the trauma leads Melvin to refuse to speak with anyone but the children. This bond with the children gave Melvin the role of watching over them while the women figure things out. Unfortunately, Melvin is deadnamed multiple times. Near the end of the film, one of the matriarch elders finally calls Melvin by his chosen name and he speaks to her, thanking her for saying his name. As much as I disliked the constant deadnaming, this moment seemed to be a way to show how community accepting and honoring a person's chosen name that aligns with their gender identity is important.

Women Talking certainly tackles a heavy topic with rage and righteous indignation. We do not get to see the group settled post-departure. Though I prefer explicit closure, having one of the teenaged girls as the narrator for this film adaptation helps it feel like this ending is one of hope. The story overall is empowering and I highly recommend watching it. However, if any of the content warnings below are of personal concern, make sure to be in the right head space to experience. As a woman who was raised under fundamentalism (though not in a colony), I personally had an intense watching experience. *Women Talking* is a passionate and raw depiction of women advocating for safety and body autonomy while also recoiling from realizing they have been living in a barely veiled toxic patriarchy.

Content Warning: Mentions of Sexual Assault, Miscarriage, Suicide, Deadnaming, Domestic Violence. Blood (but not really gore) is featured throughout the film. While no act of sexual assault is depicted on screen, the whole film revolves around conversations on how to handle the truth of violating sexual assaults and subsequent actions to be taken.

REFERENCES

Polley, Sarah. 2022. *Women Talking*. Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures; Plan B Entertainment; Hear/Say Productions.