

# Sarah Polley's *Women Talking*: What made the appalling sexual abuse possible?

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*Women Talking* follows a group of women and girls living in an isolated, socially regressive religious colony who learn they have been repeatedly sexually assaulted while drugged unconscious. The feature, written and directed by Canadian filmmaker Sarah Polley, was adapted from the 2018 novel of the same title by Miriam Toews. It was awarded Best Adapted Screenplay at this year's Academy Awards and nominated for Best Picture.

The film and novel are based on events that occurred on the fundamentalist Mennonite commune of "Manitoba" near Santa Cruz, Bolivia. The colony, founded in 1991, derives its name ultimately from Mennonite communities in the western Canadian province of Manitoba. The approximately 2,000 residents speak *Plautdeutsch* (Mennonite Low German), dress "plainly" and do not use electricity or automobiles.

In 2011, seven men were convicted of drugging and raping more than 130 women and children between 2005 and 2009. An eighth man was later convicted of supplying the drugs.

Polley's film begins with a sweeping montage of events in the immediate aftermath of the crimes. A shocked woman, Ona (Rooney Mara), lying in bed, looks down at her badly bruised thighs and cries for her mother. A young narrator recounts that "when we woke up to hands that were no longer there, the elders told us it was the work of ghosts, or Satan... It went on for years, to all of us."

An enraged mother, Salome (Claire Foy), forces herself into a house and stabs her male attacker before she's wrestled to the ground. The male assailants are escorted out of the colony and into police custody "for their own protection." The narrator continues: "Almost all of the men of the colony went to the city to post bail for the attackers. We were given two days to forgive the attackers before they returned. If we did not forgive them we would be ordered out of the colony and denied entry into the

kingdom of heaven."

A title card reads, "What follows is an act of female imagination."

Three generations of women from three families gather in a hayloft to decide what to do next. They have 24 hours before the men are back. Do they stay and do nothing, remain and fight, or do they leave? A thoughtful, university-educated exile who has recently returned to the commune, August (Ben Whishaw), volunteers to record the meeting's minutes. The women cannot read or write.

Director/writer Polley sees women talking amongst themselves as a "radical act of democracy," despite the complete absence of any men in the discussion. The unstated assumption, of course, is that the men don't count because they are all complicit in the crimes, whether directly or indirectly.

From the outset, this type of noxious middle class feminist outlook infects the drama, lending it both myopia and blandness. For a film that claims to be "inspired by true events," salient details of time and place are left out. We're given no indication that these women are even Mennonites, let alone any details that might suggest their conditions of daily life. All we know from the heavy-handed colour desaturation and the low-fi surroundings is that these women inhabit a drab and backward world, but this is thanks more to the telling than the showing.

Much of the dialogue in *Women Talking* stands out as self-conscious and laboured. It strains the viewer's imagination to think that this cloistered circle of women is able to conjure forth such sage and snappy lines as "Perhaps forgiveness can, in some instances, be confused with permission," or, "Leaving and fleeing are different words with different meanings. They each say something about us." It goes on like this, a dull sermonizing better delivered in a gender studies lecture hall. The cast is an ensemble of talented actors, but not

one of them is able to pull a convincing, artistic rabbit out of such a ham-fisted and contrived hat (script).

Here is another typical exchange that takes place as the group wrestles with the pros and cons of staying versus leaving:

Wise matriarch Agata (Judith Ivey) addresses the group: “Time will heal. Our freedom and safety are our ultimate goals. And it is men who prevent us from achieving these goals.” Embittered Mariche (Jessie Buckley), who is married to a violent man but is afraid of leaving, retorts, “But not all men.” Ona, the moral arbiter-philosopher queen, horns in with “Perhaps not men, but a way of seeing the world and us women that has been allowed to take hold of men’s hearts and minds.” Later on, Salome, the furious mother whose young daughter was also abused, asserts that “it is the elders’ quest for power that is responsible.” Agata continues: “And they have taught the lesson of power to the boys and men of the colony and the boys and men have been excellent students.”

Press rinse and repeat—this sort of empty, self-satisfied moralizing saturates the entire film. But for all the women’s talking, what is meticulously avoided is any allusion to the *concrete* conditions in the colony that gave rise to the abuse, such as semi-medieval religious hierarchy/dogma and its incompatibility with social equality, and extreme seclusion and economic hardship. How these women and their children—illiterate and unable to speak any language widely spoken in the country—would fare outside of the colony without financial means, access to housing, jobs, schools, is anyone’s guess.

Miriam Toews, who wrote the novel *Women Talking* is based on, approached the story as an “imagined response to real events.”

According to Frances McDormand, who stars in and co-produced Polley’s film, these events serves as “a parable for a larger world challenge.” In other words, the depraved sexual crimes committed within a remote and ideologically reactionary religious cult are taken as a direct reflection of a broader, current social problem—misogyny embedded in the “patriarchy.” It doesn’t seem to have occurred to the filmmakers that it was precisely the sequestered character of the colony, its conscious *removal* from modern life, that made the appalling activity possible.

Anything that frustrates the film’s goal of being taken as a reflection of reality must be chunked out. Polley

admits as much. She explains in one interview that she had cut a scene where the women encounter a local elderly man with dementia whom they are fond of. “While [the scene] worked beautifully in isolation, it slowed down the crucial urgency of the outcome of the conversation we had been living in for an hour and a half, and it had to go in order to be respectful to the whole.”

It is clear that the filmmakers are less “inspired by real events” than they are *disappointed* by the outcome of those events. This perspective distorts reality and feels artistically and intellectually dishonest.

Some striking facts are worth pointing out.

A *Vice* article (“The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia”) noted that the victims’ husbands and fathers were so enraged by the crimes that it’s likely the accused would have been lynched if they had not been removed from the colony. One father explains that “Every day we talked about it, but we were worried about telling the authorities. We just didn’t know how to resolve things,” His whole family including himself had been drugged with a cattle tranquilizer, and his wife and daughters sexually assaulted.

The reporter disclosed that residents privately confirmed that men and boys were also victims of the attacks, but unwilling to come forward.

After the assaults, the women and girls stayed in the colony. As one mental health councillor told *Vice*, they “have no way out.” He explained that, “In any other society, by elementary school a child knows that if they are being abused they can, at least in theory, go to the police or a teacher or some other authority. But who can these girls go to?”

Despite the men convicted of the wave of assaults ending up behind bars, residents say the abuse continues.

None of these complicating facts make it into Toews’ novel or Polley’s film, as it would compromise the neatly packaged “imagined” ending—essentially both a middle-class feminist romance and a disservice to the women and men the story purports to be about.



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