

Dr. Bakari Transcript

I had the extreme pleasure of having the opportunity to talk with Dr. Rosenna Bakari, the Executive Director of Talking Trees, Inc., about her wonderful organization, and also about sex, living openly, and the key to maintaining a healthy sex life and perspective in college. Doctor Bakari founded Talking Trees, and has been working tirelessly since 2010 to advocate for, build community with, and provide access to resources for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and incest. Through her website, <https://www.TalkingTreesSurvivors.com>, and her Facebook page, [Talking Trees: Adult Survivors of CSA](#), Dr. Bakari's organization has provided a space for discussion, living openly, learning, and healing for adult survivors everywhere. Talking Trees creates a space where survivors can live openly without shame, where survivors can have conversations about their situations and healing journeys, and can find power and belonging in community. Talking Trees is especially important because there is an enormous lack of resources and lack of conversation available to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and the silence around the existence of adult survivors oftentimes results in their stigmatization. Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman tell us exactly how such silence can be problematic: "...It matters to us what is said about us, who says it, and to whom it is said, having the opportunity to talk about one's life, to give an account of it, to interpret it, is integral to leading that life rather than being led through it, hence our distrust of the male monopoly over accounts of women's lives... part of human life, human living, is talking about it, and we can be sure that being silenced in one's own account of one's life is a kind of amputation that signals oppression" (Lugones and Spelman, 18). When we're not able to openly talk *about ourselves to each other*—about our lives, our history, our pain, our joy, our humanity—we find ourselves oppressed and silenced. Not only *talking about* our lives, but also being able to define ourselves in our own terms, is essential to living freely and openly. Since there are so few spaces or opportunities for adult survivors to share their experiences, their experiences are particularly influenced with oppression due to the deafening silence surrounding the issue of childhood sexual abuse and incest, and the radical lack of access to resources for this population. To help break the silence, Dr. Bakari has written several books, has a spoken word series on YouTube, and of course provides a Facebook page that is full of frequent, open conversations. The range and accessibility of Dr. Bakari's works makes sure that everyone—college students and older adults—can educate themselves, find resources for healing, and live openly and freely.

CO: Hi! I'm Caroline, one of the journalists for the Bang Magazine, and with me today is Dr. Rosenna Bakari, Executive Director of Talking Trees, Incorporated. So, the first question I have is: can you describe the work you do and why it's important?

RB: Talking Trees is an empowerment organization for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and incest, and initially I founded the organization because, as I began to live openly as an adult survivor, I realized that adult survivors needed—all adult survivors needed a safe space and safe place to heal, meaning they needed information about the experience of being a survivor. Oddly enough, because survivors live largely in isolation, there's a lack of information. So, when we say adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, that means the victimization occurred in childhood at a time that we didn't or weren't able to sort out what was happening. So that leaves survivors with the narrative of oftentimes the violator, or the dysfunction, the dysfunctional environment in which the violations took place. So, there's a surprisingly huge lack of

information about survivors, even amongst themselves, is what I found. For me, I was literally going through the research journals to figure out, or to help sort out how my own experiences, including grooming, including what silence looks like, and the lack of spaces to disclose, and the resistance to disclosure. All that stuff is in the research journals. None of it, or most of it, was not in the active lives of survivors. Because if you don't talk, and you're not given space to ask questions about these experiences because they happened so long ago, then you just live with them and live with all the assumptions about what takes place after that. So it's very necessary. When I began healing, the number was 40 million adult survivors, now it's closer to 60 million adult survivors. So, imagine that number of people walking around with varying levels of confusion about their experiences, and who they are, and what they deserve as people in the world, that sort of stuff. These are the same people, mind you, who are raising children, who are teaching classrooms, and mentoring other people's children, in doctors' offices, in lawyers' offices, in relationships that are difficult to maintain, never, ever, *ever* having addressed childhood trauma. So, the importance of the work for me is about moving humanity forward and changing the direction of this country, changing the direction of the world, when you begin to wake people up to the reality of sexual abuse, which is co-signed by a male-dominant culture.

CO: Do you identify your work as feminist? Why or why not?

RB: Well, when I started the work, ironically, I did not identify it as feminist work. I just wanted to feel better [laughs]. I wanted other survivors to feel better. I wanted to live in my truth. In fact, when I started Talking Trees the model was one focus only, and that focus was purely on providing information for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse so that they could heal. The deeper I dove into the work, and the more I researched, and the more I looked at what causes these issues, and under what circumstances children are likely to be victimized, and looked at the numbers—looking at 90% males as violators and 90% females as victims, and the silence surrounding it, and all this other stuff, it became a feminist issue for me—or I shouldn't say it became—I became aware of the feminism connected to these issues. And I got to the point where I just could not deny it, that I could not continue to address these issues for survivors without talking about rape culture, without talking about male dominance, because it was too narrow. When I began to understand and look at, for example, the sex trade. I was not a sex trade victim, but many survivors are. But they don't count themselves as survivors! Well, that didn't make sense to me. Female genital mutilation didn't make sense to me. It's not a big stretch to see the connection between all these horrible things that happen to women in the world, so when I began to put things together, then there was no longer denying that this is a feminist issue. Which of course explains why we don't get much attention for it [laughs]. But feminist issues are humanity issues, so [I'm] trying to connect those two as well.

CO: How does the mission of Talking Trees relate to college femme- and female-identified students specifically?

RB: One of the issues that we addressed with Talking Trees from the very beginning has been about lowering the age in which survivors disclose and begin to address issues, so that they can heal. The age is currently in the 40s. Most survivors don't know that, so we beat up on ourselves for carrying it for so long. And then we [Talking Trees] go, "well you know, that's the average age, so you're kind of right there on time", and we can talk about lowering that age, or why it's that age, but again, all these [are] things that you don't know until you begin to actually explore these issues and try to heal. But that's a long time to carry something, when the average age of violation is between 8 and 11—depending on what stats you look at—but that's a long time to live in self-doubt, that's a long time to live with the negative thoughts that you're left with, and

the concerns that go unaddressed. I mean, to get to have something happen to you in early childhood, and no one even gets to say, “I’m sorry that happened to you”, is huge. It’s traumatic in and of itself. So there’s trauma, and there’s trauma on top of the trauma, because no one will acknowledge the trauma. So that being said, [with] the college age I think, we have to start initiating these conversations *everywhere*. Everywhere. We have to start dispelling the myth that victimization promotes lesbianism, or being gay—it does not, it absolutely does not. But if you happen to be lesbian, and have that issue, and you’re not talking about those issues, it’s just compounded and compiled guilt or shame [that’s] thrust upon you, this belief that something is wrong with you, or something is wrong with the way you relate to people, or your attraction to people—because there’s nobody helping you address these issues, the real issue of sexual abuse. So, the more places that we can find to address these issues and concerns for adult survivors, understanding that they are everywhere—they are in the college classroom, they are in the schools, they are in every single workforce that there is. So, in my mind, there is no place that we shouldn’t address the issue, but we definitely should address the issue in a place like a college campus, where people are often beginning to have expressions of their sexual beliefs. So, if your sexual beliefs evolve out of dysfunction, then that’s a huge problem.

CO: What resources are available for college age adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and incest?

RB: Wow, that I don’t know if I have a good answer to. Talking Trees certainly is open to adult survivors, so we target people 18 and over. That being said, it’s probably not a number one resource [for college-aged people] because—it is, it should be, and it’s designed that way, but what you’ll find is a lot of again, those 40-year olds, 40-plus year olds, and they’re just at a different developmental level than college-age students. So, all those issues—so, somehow we have to close the gap, because that’s what [Talking Trees is] supposed to do. So, we want to get people before the addictions set in, before the divorces set in, before the family dysfunction sets in, before the 20 years on medication set in. That’ll happen over time, the problem is, because we’re only just beginning to uncover these issues publically and reach out to survivors of any age, that we haven’t been begun to close that gap which is, in my mind, such an important reason for adult survivors to live openly, because we can’t close that gap in silence, that gap will never get closed silently. So, until those of us who can live openly are ready to have these conversations with younger survivors, and heal in a way that will help guide younger survivors away from the negative consequences of sexual abuse then it’s a little tricky. In fact, I think what might happen [laughs], is if we can begin to target younger people, then they might be the ones to teach the older survivors about living authentically, and with transparency, because they haven’t gone down this long mysterious road of unhappiness. But that gap hasn’t closed yet. So, I don’t know that there are a lot of resources that are directed specifically toward young adults, and there should be, so I think so part of what Talking Trees is trying to do is trying to get some consulting in these school counseling areas with the Title IX committees, that sort of stuff. So, we can’t keep waiting until something happens, and even asking the questions, because we also know—or at least I also know that survivors of childhood sexual abuse are 4 times more likely to be victims of adult sexual abuse. That’s huge, that’s really, really important to understand and know on college campuses. So it’s important to ask that question of victims when they come in with claims of sexual assault, to be able to have that conversation. So, you’re trying to deal with that immediate sexual assault when there may have been 2, 3, or a history of sexual assault that nobody is addressing so you’ve got layers on top of layers on top of layers of stuff to deal with, because people keep forgetting, or ignoring, or not responding to the initial trauma.

CO: My next question is: in your work, what strategies are most effective in communicating the mission of Talking Trees to a wide audience?

RB: Ugh, I hate this answer, I HATE this answer, [but] I would have to say, ding ding ding, Facebook. And the reason Facebook is, one, because Talking Trees has always had a goal to be international. About 35 percent of our online audience is international outside of the United States. That's probably bigger than any other organization can say. But we target internationally through where we send out posts, and that sort of stuff, and we get a lot of feedback. I mean it's bad here, but it's even worse a lot of places. There really are—the conversations have not begun to happen at all, and we tend to get a lot of younger people from the Caribbean and from some of the African English-speaking countries, [other] than what we target here in America so that's an interesting phenomenon too, but there's a there's a real lack of resources. There was a time when I was trying to even move the conversation from Facebook—because you have no control over it really—to just the [Talking Trees] website, and I ran into a lot of problems with that, one being that many countries have difficulty accessing websites, but guess what, every country you can access Facebook. So, that has been the biggest outreach for us, the biggest venue for us, has been Facebook.

CO: What have you found are the largest obstacles to promoting access to sexual education and services in college populations you work with?

RB: The commitment to the male dominance paradigm is the biggest obstacle. And when I say commitment to, I mean the fact that people don't recognize it, don't take time to recognize it -- males and females alike, because we've come to live by these standards, we stop questioning them. Even when they don't feel right for us, even when they don't fit for us, and so there's this tendency to just want to go with the flow, and that's got to be the biggest obstacle. I mean, we can look and see at the questions that we ask; "well, what were you wearing?" "How much did you drink?" Right? Those are questions that protect the male dominance paradigm, and create obstacles for victims to get help or to be heard. So, this world that exists, has existed for a long time under governance of males and everything that supports them in their livelihood on this earth. I mean from one edge of the earth to the other. And so, women have sort of gotten their acknowledgements, their whatever, based on how well they can fit in, or on how well they can serve, or how well they can be acknowledged by males. And for many of us, we become satisfied with that. Well, not satisfied as if we've chosen it, but satisfied as if we stop questioning it. So, from religion to standards of education, to what we consider success and happiness, and we stop even asking if there is a different way or if there is a better way. Lord knows if there is a feminine way, right? We're so afraid that men won't like us, we're so afraid [that] we insist that this is good enough. And so as long as we hold onto those ideas, that we're so afraid of creating something new, then that fear is what I think is the biggest obstacle. It requires a paradigm shift, and that's scary for a lot of people.

CO: Yeah, I can see how it would be, for a lot of people.

RB: People prefer the devil they know.

CO: Of course. We like what we're used to.

DB: Exactly.

CO: What advice would you give college femme-identifying and female identifying students about maintaining a healthy sex life and a healthy sex perspective?

RB: Read "Original Sin" by Dr. Rosenna Bakari! (laughs) That's my advice.

CO: Can you talk a little bit about [what's] in the book?

DB: In the book—understanding what the origins of sexuality have been in the world. And I mean, literally the origins in evolution. It hasn't always been this way, and so the book "Original Sin" looks at that narrative that we've been given. Even this whole hunter-gatherer thing that we've bought into, which is part of the male paradigm narrative of males and females, that "women are this, or men are this" but they haven't always been, and the claim that this is how it has been is just incorrect! It hasn't always been that way, it has not always been hunter-gatherer. So we've got to go back even further than that. We keep trying to solve problems with the same information that created the problems. And "Original Sin" goes outside of that context, so it is uncomfortable for people to look at. What is your body meant to be, and what does pleasure really mean to you? So it's not—you know, we went through this phase with young people, of sex becoming a thing of quantity, that "I can have as much sex [as I want]", but we didn't pay attention to quality! We got duped, once again! Right? So here we are, young people having all this sex, and then you start talking about orgasming, and they go "what?" So, we haven't gotten a lot further. So, really, understanding sex—I mean sex, the physical act of sex—understanding that, and how that's connected in a much purer way to the emotional aspects of sex. Not in a way that gets you *power* from some human being, but indulging and engaging in sex in a way that taps into the power that you had all along. It's not about taking power from somebody else, it's about sharing a power that you have within you! That's a whole different way to have sex with someone. Whether it's a one-night stand, or it's somebody that you plan on being with for the rest of your life. But I say, understand why you're having sex. Don't have sex as part of a resistance, you know? Don't have sex out of peer pressure, don't have sex because you're afraid that's the only way that somebody will stay with you. Really, really understand why you're having sex with a person. Period. What does it mean to be a sexual human being? Ask yourself some deeper questions if you're going to be a sexual human being. And then, move into it with knowledge and understanding. So, that's my advice.

CO: That's great advice! I mean, I appreciate it for sure. And then my final question is: how has your work shaped your ideas about sexual pleasure, sexual empowerment, and how to attain both of those?

RB: You know, it's interesting, I didn't know that people were having such horrible sex, first of all [laughs]. I didn't know that until I started doing this work and having conversations with people, and I'm like: "why are people having such horrible sex?" And so that really prompted me again to really dig deeper into these issues and concerns of people. And the things that I hear people say about the way that they have sex is very disturbing. Very male-dominant experiences. Sex is a beautiful, powerful, spiritual, wonderful experience. It's just not like any other experience in this world. It should never, ever leave a person doubtful, or feeling harmed, or feeling victimized—all these negative experiences that people have out of sex... something's wrong! That's our first clue that something's wrong with our society, is that something that is meant to be so beautiful, and [meant to] keep the world in motion, has become so destructive for people. So, the work has shaped my vigilance about [giving] information to people, and saying to women, "stop laying down, being a sacrifice, you are not a human vibrator, stop allowing yourself to be treated that way". And that's a really scary thought! When I say to women, "we've had this discussion before, don't allow penetration without orgasm", women think I'm crazy, and I go, "listen to what you're saying". The fact that that's an odd suggestion to you... I'm baffled by women's willingness to have their body used by another human being. So, when I take away that—when I take away your will, your own will to have pleasure, but your will [is] to sacrifice your pleasure for someone else—If I can take that away from you? Come on, you know you ain't

serious about equal pay. You ain't serious about equal jobs, you ain't serious about equal housework. If there's no power in the bedroom, there's no power in the board room.

CO: Wow I love that, that is so insightful. Well, I just want to conclude the interview, then, by thanking you for spending the time to talk to me but also helping us with this project and giving us your wonderful insight and all of your expertise. We really appreciate it, and thank you so much.

DB: Any time. Thank you!!

It was so enlightening to speak with Dr. Bakari. Her work is so important, not only because adult survivors deserve to be heard and supported, but because as Dr. Bakari told us, all feminist issues are related. As NOW explains, it's clear that we can't start to address one issue that affects women without talking about and addressing others: "We realize that woman's problems are linked to many broader questions of social justice; their solution will require concerted action by man groups" (NOW 186). In addition, hearing Dr. Bakari discuss how she came to create Talking Trees out of a place of pain, and out of a desire to live in truth reminded me of bell hooks' discussion of theory as a lived experience. She states: "I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend, to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory a location for healing" (37, hooks). Much like hooks, Dr. Bakari created a theory from a place of pain in order to facilitate healing—the theory being that survivors were underserved and silenced, that the male dominance paradigm is implicated in this oppression, that survivors need a space to live openly in order to heal, and most of all, that survivors *deserve* to heal. It was so exciting to hear about Dr. Bakari's work relating to pleasure and healthy sexuality, as well. It was so empowering to hear how she emphasized how important it is for women to demand pleasure, to demand an orgasm if they're engaging in sex—especially because we as women have been so trained to accept that sex isn't for us. Dr. Bakari's discussion of sex brings to mind Anne Koedt's stance on the female orgasm: "Women have ...been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men... What we must do is redefine our sexuality. We must discard the "normal" concepts of sex and create new guidelines which take into account mutual sexual enjoyment" (Koedt 196). Referencing the male dominance paradigm, Dr. Bakari also illuminated for us how we as women have been tricked into thinking that we don't deserve pleasure, or that sex should only be intended for the pleasure of a man or your partner before yourself. Instead, we need to demand our orgasm, demand our pleasure, and come to understand our bodies and sex as powerful, as deserving of care and attention, and worthy of discussion. As Dr. Bakari tells us, we need to think of sex as something that's beautiful, empowering, and something that all partners involved should engage in equally and respectfully. Only when we start demanding orgasm and attention in the bedroom can we start to have really good sex! If that's not a good reason to start demanding what you deserve, then I really don't know what is. Stay sexy!

Sources:

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