

Women's Gathering, not your usual gathering

March 31, 2023

With the intention to bring the tango community closer and inspired by the book [The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters](#), our beloved tango dancer, teacher, DJ, and organizer, [Ayano Yoneda](#), hosted the first two editions of Women's Gathering at the beginning of 2023. The following conversations happened between SF Loves Tango and Ayano before and after these two events. We would love to share with you the *what* and *why* behind these gatherings.



Women's Gathering 1st edition at The Dome, Oakland

♥️ SF Loves Tango

👤 Ayano

♥️ What is a Women's Gathering?

It's a casual gathering of women, including **gender-marginalized people**.

I have two things in mind to achieve:

- to build an intergenerational network of women who can support each other;
- to practice social skills that may be challenging to do in real life.

The **first edition** took place on Jan 28th, 2023 in Oakland, and the **second edition** occurred on Feb 11th, 2023 in Palo Alto. The attendance was 20-30 people on average for each event.

♥️ What happened at the actual event?

In tango, we like to dress up when going out to dance. A timeless joke among women is we never have enough clothes and shoes, even though we often have too many! So the first hour was a clothing and shoe swap for free! It's a lot of fun and helped to ease people into the space.

Then we gathered and sat in a circle, and did 3 rounds of role-playing exercises by pairing up folks with someone they don't know well, including:

- One person invites (verbal or non-verbal), while the other person says "*No, thank you.*" to decline.
- While dancing, the person in the follower's role says "*I have to stop dancing. Thank you.*" and leaves.
- One person introduces themselves to the other person, then checks on them by saying "*How are you doing? Is everything okay?*".

By demonstrating before each exercise and inviting the participants to switch roles, the exercises are to help everyone get comfortable with setting clear boundaries while expressing kindness.



Women's Gathering 1st edition at The Dome

♥ How did people react to the gatherings?

In one participant's words, *"It was fun and funny and yet serious. I loved it! Thank you – Sisterhood is powerful."* Many asked for this event to take place again and more often. Some even suggested that there could be a men's gathering.

Some others shared,

“The role-playing exercises were surprising and radical to many.

It was unusual to share challenging experiences around the dance with such a large group of fellow dancers who don’t know each other well.

It was unusual to be invited to act out how to ask a person to dance and how to say no.

It was unusual to stop mid-song when your dance partner is making you uncomfortable – in other words, your gut instinct tells you someone might be a creeper and that may compromise your integrity.

However, it was reassuring to be reminded that our bodies are our own and that we know what is okay and what isn’t.

It was affirming that it is okay to discuss and stand up for ourselves if something causes discomfort, and support each other with the ‘see something, say something’ mentality.”

Participant

There must be challenges. Can you share what they are?

The purpose of this project is to unite and not to divide. There is a very fine line between “practicing safety skills and sharing experiences” and “witch hunt”. I was not interested in blaming, naming, or shaming, but rather in practicing skills that can be useful in real life.

I didn’t intend the event to be a “class” or teach anybody anything. But over time, I was surprised to repeatedly hear the same episode – experienced dancers (and even teachers!) have never said NO to an invitation or stopped dancing even when they wished they did. Once I realized there are so many people who are unsure what to expect and how to act in particular situations that arise during the milongas, I figured role-playing could be an effective way to get people comfortable with these uncomfortable scenarios. These two editions were my first attempt and it’s an iterative process to improve.

As Javier Rodriguez says, “no liberates you,” and to be a good dancer, you have to say NO, that you cannot say yes to everything, because YES is something special. When NO is respected, YES and the connection becomes more meaningful!

What was your motivation to organize these gatherings?

Teaching beginners how to say no and watching how they behave in the milonga made me realize the limitation – that **we need the entire community to create a safe environment for the dance where two hearts can melt.**

I'd never forget what happened to me during my very first trip to Buenos Aires many years ago. A woman, who was a complete stranger, witnessed me dancing with a leader several tandas in a row, came over, and told me "you don't have to accept all the invitations". She even pointed out to me who were the nice people to dance with. I blushed immediately because I realized I was embarrassing myself – not until she pointed it out, that I had not even noticed that I didn't want to dance with that person, to begin with.

I imagine that it took much courage for her to cross the boundary of politeness to approach me. I'm very grateful that she did. That was a very valuable lesson. I want to encourage more people to extend these small acts of kindness.

Is there a long-term goal or any plans for what's next?

My long-term goal is that we, as tango dancers, all mature, and all the dancing that happens is because both sides of the partnership want it, and that we, as a community, help the new dancer grow with generosity and kindness.

I want to extend the invitation to everyone – not only women and gender-marginalized people – **to have a safe space to express concerns and practice social skills, to get to know each other outside of the dance, and build a strong community together.**

Leaders (anyone who leads) face a different set of challenges. I'm in the process of investigating and identifying what the core scenarios are and what skills are useful. I hope to host a gathering for all dancers later this summer of 2023. So stay tuned!