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Culture and Condoms. Integrating approaches to HIV and AIDS

Mothertongue Project in South Africa

Using arts to tackle violence against women and HIV and AIDS

Von Awino Okech

The Mothertongue Project is a collective of women artists, facilitators and healing practitioners who, inspired by Forum Theater, employed participatory arts methodologies to explore the intersections between violence against women and HIV/AIDS. The plays opened up vibrant discussions on socio-cultural issues, which are at the heart of the twin issues of violence against women and HIV, and on the traditional roles of women and men.

Khayelitsha, a black township, is located some 30 minutes drive from Cape Town. Home to half a million people, it is the third largest township in South Africa and the largest black township in Cape Town. The ethnic makeup of Khayelitsha is approximately 90 per cent African with IsiXhosa as the predominant language. A creation of the former apartheid regime, Khayelitsha emerged out of the relocation in the early 1980s of all 'legal' Africans from other townships to this new site. There are high rates of sex-related violence particularly rape of women, including a range of hate crimes against lesbians. Most cases are not reported.

Most organisations in South Africa work either on HIV and AIDS as a specific area of focus or deal with violence against women. The groups work largely around rape. Research findings point to the intrinsic link between HIV and AIDS and violence against women.

In 2006, Mothertongue Project initiated discussions with groups in Khayelitsha on the best way a feminist theatre collective could contribute to activism at community level on HIV and AIDS and violence against women. Mothertongue Project is a Cape Town-based collective of women artists who explore keys to empowerment of women by developing practical processes of healing and transformation. We spent two months during which we consulted with a range of community-based organisations that work either in the field of HIV and AIDS or respond to rape or other forms of violence against women. The result was the pilot project Laphumilanga (IsiXhosa for sunrise), whose first phase was implemented in 2006 with Phase II continuing in 2007. The pilot project was supported by UNIFEM's trust fund on violence against women and the second phase by Action Aid South Africa.

Role of drama in fostering change

The pilot phase of this project had a number of objectives. We wanted to create awareness in the community around the intersections between violence against women and HIV and AIDS. One cannot focus on HIV and AIDS in isolation because broader gender inequities also contribute to the situation. Through the work, we wanted to articulate the value of drama in fostering change with emphasis on the infected and affected as critical voices. In the process, we trained a pilot group of 28 women to use drama to advocate around HIV and AIDS and violence against women. We created the space for an assessment of their personal narratives in relation to the intersections.

Since our work focuses on healing and transformation, it was important that the pilot group we worked with be empowered by the process and in turn make informed choices around situations of violence in their own lives as well as their HIV status (whether HIV-positive or negative).

Our project was inspired specifically by Forum Theatre, an interactive participatory theatre form developed in Latin America in the 1960s by theatre director Augusto Boal. This is a performance where the distinction between reality and theatre is lifted by inviting the audience to act their ideas on stage. The pilot group had 28 women aged between 25 and 50 years and included support group members, counsellors and volunteers within community and national organisations working around either HIV or gender violence in Khayelitsha. Within the 10 days of the workshop, participants brought to our attention three cases of women who had been raped and murdered. They were either neighbours or friends of the participants. In addition, there were at least 10 other similar reports in local community newspapers and cases before the local magistrate's court.

Gendering women and men

The theatre workshop was an important component of the project. We engaged in an analysis of the gendered dynamics of HIV and AIDS through participants' experiences. Through a variety of arts-based exercises that included creative writing, photography and role plays, we initiated discussions on the participants' perceptions about the causes of violence against women in their community. The participants pointed to the predominance of culture in informing the processes of gendering women and men. This was exemplified in reference to the initiation process for young amaXhosa men. This practice is known as 'ulwaluko', which is a traditional custom marking the transition from boyhood to manhood. Participants argued that when boys are taught 'philosophies of manhood' in the bush, the idea that men are heads of families and that they are stronger than women are emphasised and internalised by the initiates. However, as part of similar processes for young women during 'ntonjane' (the rite of passage for young women amongst the amaXhosa) they are socialised to accept that a married woman must submit to the will of the man of the house.

The role of socialisation and its subsequent impact on power relations between women and men were some of the key areas that were later explored through the plays. The workshop provided a safe space that allowed participants to interact with other women, and share their stories and strategies about common problems. Using these stories, they created storylines that were used to develop the plays that were later taken into the community. The play-building process for most of the women, therefore, became a therapeutic way to process their experiences.

Twelve open-ended pieces were created and performed in Khayelitsha. Each Laphumilanga performance attracted audiences of about 200 people. A total of 3200 people were reached through 16 performances. The performances were conducted at a range of advocacy events held by partner organisations in the area. Other performance venues included the Magistrate's court, churches, schools and public spaces such as malls, taxi ranks and bus stations. Most spectators were women, with the youth coming in second, followed by men. The audience composition differed depending on the nature of the event and the location.

The plays dealt with numerous issues including the popular perception that sex is better without a condom; early childhood marriages, why young girls are married off at a younger age to older men; and the challenge of disclosing one's HIV status to a partner.

The goal of these plays was to get the community to unpack some of the popular socio-cultural perceptions surrounding these issues and challenge these dominant perceptions. A range of opinions emerged while addressing reasons for men's reluctance to use condoms and most women's inability to successfully negotiate for this option. Community members and participants said this was reinforced by the culturally endorsed notion that it is a man's role to initiate sex, and to reverse the practice would cause friction within the relationship. They noted that men are quick to mistrust and feel insecure if a woman initiates or suggests new styles of having sex. In addition, insisting on using a condom was also attributed to one's knowledge of their HIV status. Insistence would also raise a lot of questions that may lead to disclosure that could in turn result in being ostracised as well as being verbally or physically abused.

Unintentional peer counsellors

Through reports written after every performance and during monthly reflection workshops, the participants indicated that after their performances, spectators approached them with queries on their next performance, showed interest in being part of the project and, on occasion, sought help from the women on problems they were facing. Unintentionally, they became peer counsellors. As a spectator said, "I see myself taking the work that I have done here to my support group so that we too can go out and show people how to be independent, because we will be protecting those who think they know when they know nothing."

After performances and during the impact assessment, many community members indicated that the plays addressed important issues that people are not always willing to talk about. The plays opened up vibrant discussions on socio-cultural issues, which we believe, are at the heart

of the twin issues of violence against women and HIV. The discussions questioned the traditional roles of women particularly within the amaXhosa tradition. The plays provided the 'safety' required for women to actively challenge these positions. We believe this is the first step in social transformation.

Based on an impact assessment conducted at the end of the first year, the reception and impact of this work has exceeded our expectations. Achievements have been recorded on the number of women who chose to leave abusive relationships, those who found the strength to disclose their HIV status to their partners and family and in the number of community members who begun to actively use counselling support centres in the area. The project promoted the participants' ability to actualise their dreams of acting and to re-enact moments of their lives through the plays. Translating an experience into a theatrical narrative in a workshop space and subsequently into a play for the community involves a complex process of reflection, release and healing that was realised by most of the women, like the one who said: "I have gone through big changes in my life since performing the plays. I used to drink a lot before, and as an HIV-positive person, this is not good for my health. During the period of making the plays for the outreach performances, I realised that it was hypocritical of me to preach and educate others when I did not apply these lessons to my own life.

Since finding work as an HIV counsellor, I now try to live by example to clients that look up to me due to my acting work and as a HIV survivor."

Creating 'safety nets'

Despite these gains, it would be premature to celebrate without recognising the complexity of the environment, the issues we are dealing with and the broader environment (national and international) that shows increasing 'hostility' to women's rights work. Considering how these factors impact on our work, its successes and sustainability is critical to any practitioner's planning. There are questions around the responsibility that we have to the communities within which we work. The role the workshop and the resultant community of support played in the lives of the plays' participants cannot be underestimated. These frameworks provided the necessary safety and motivation that is easily sustained during a project. The question remains as to how these can be sustained when they 'return' to a community where everyday occurrences of violence and abuse of women are disenfranchising.

It is necessary to create 'safety nets' for the participants as means of ensuring that the impact is more sustainable. This involves building stronger partnerships and networks with local organisations already working jointly or separately on the intersections, to ensure that they incorporate the same message and language into their work. The strategy adopted through the project to work with women already involved with community-based institutions and support groups is a mechanism to ensure that the work is sustained through these structures. As a result, performances such as the ones we conducted and resultant discussions are viewed as

central to achieving their goals and would be integrated into programmatic content and strategies within these organisations. We, therefore, propose consolidated efforts towards programmatic intervention instead of parallel processes.

In going forward we intend to provide drama therapy training to counsellors and to infuse elements of gender training for community organisations that have been working solely around HIV and AIDS. The outreach work continues to be integral to strategic development for they provide an opportunity to engage with current community concerns and perceptions.

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Lessons learned

1. It is important to recognise the complexity of the environment, the issues being dealt with and the broader environment (national and international) that shows increasing 'hostility' to women's rights work.
2. The role the workshop and the resultant community of support played in the lives of the plays' participants was critical. These frameworks provided the necessary safety and motivation that is easily sustained during a project.
3. Translating an experience into a theatrical narrative in a workshop space and subsequently into a play for the community involves a complex process of reflection, release and healing.

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