



Gender-based
Violence
Prevention
Project



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Continuing the Conversation

Forum Theatre Review Q2



USING THEATRE TO EXPLORE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

On August 9th and 10th, 2018, newcomer youth between the ages of 13 and 20 participated in two forum theatre workshops exploring some of the issues that young people experience around gender-based violence.

These forum theatre workshops are part of the YMCA Gender-Based Violence Prevention Project and were created in collaboration with the Irondale Ensemble Project, a Halifax-based theatre company which develops innovative theatre projects about social ideas and issues.

The goal of the workshops was to give young people the opportunity to discuss and reflect on a variety of social issues, such as sexism, racism and inequality, and to practice ways of dealing with conflicts they might encounter in their life in a safe space.

During their time together, participants identified and discussed a number of topics, including:

- *Tension between old and new cultures*
- *Bullying*
- *Gender roles and sexism*
- *Conflict de-escalation*
- *Self-advocacy*
- *Being an ally*
- *Challenging stereotypes*
- *Feeling like an outsider*
- *Reacting before thinking*
- *Coping with other people's expectations and assumptions*



Actors and actresses that were part of the Forum Theatre Performance

FORUM THEATRE

Forum theatre is the performance of a set of scenes or vignettes by actors, in this case youth, who the audience can direct, thus altering the outcome each time the scene is played. Through participation in the interactive dramatic process the audience members are empowered to create solutions to these problems or scenarios presented by participating and guiding the scene. By sharing their own personal experience or opinion, forum theatre offers people the opportunity to explore, in a safe environment, possibilities and suggest alternative changes in behaviour. This medium gives people the tools for self empowerment and social change, while developing their dramatic skills and raising the profile of theatre as a universal form for expression and communication.

The scenes that played out in the workshops were a compilation of first voice experiences with gender and being a newcomer youth. Throughout the workshops young people commented on how realistic it felt - "I liked how it was true about what happens in real life" and "It felt like real life" - and shared similar experiences from their own life.



Discussions that followed the performances

THEATRE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

On the day of the performances, Kathryn Bates-Khan introduced the Forum Theatre performance that was developed. She had the following to say,

"We would like to start by acknowledging that we are on unceded Mi'kmaw territory. We want to thank everyone for attending and welcome you to this theatre presentation this afternoon. The team of people that have been working together to create this workshop are: The YMCA Gender-Based Violence Prevention Project, Youth Outreach Program, Child & Youth Settlement staff and dedicated youth volunteers along with the Irondale Ensemble Project. The scenes are a compilation of first voice experiences with gender and being a newcomer youth."

Irondale Ensemble Project is a theatre company that is made up of a group of artists who share a commitment to creating and working in and through ensemble. Ensemble means valuing each member of the group and creatively working together. Irondale focuses on creating new theatre - and taking it into community settings and schools. They develop innovative theatre projects that are about social ideas and issues.

The YMCA Gender-Based Violence Prevention Project started in September 2017. We developed tools and resources through research, and activities with newcomer children, youth and families. This year the focus of the project is sharing these tools and resources through workshops, meetings and partnerships with other service providers as well as working with newcomers around information sharing, awareness raising and overcoming barriers.

We also appreciate the support of our funder: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. There is certainly a lot of work to do to build healthy communities and at the YMCA, we want to be part of social change and positive solutions to gender-based violence prevention in the settlement sector".



CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

Midya is 16 years old and is originally from Syria. She joined the forum theatre project as an actor partly because she wanted to get ideas on how to tackle similar obstacles in her own life and how to be an ally for others.

"Especially when we are teenagers we see a lot of [these issues] in school, in the street, on buses, everywhere. I thought if I can help [other people] with it I will do," said Midya. "I'm getting experience from all the scenes we are doing... so if this kind of thing happens to me I know what to say."

She also participated because of her strong convictions about the importance of promoting more understanding of sexism, racism and cultural differences in our society.

In a scene where the main character - Bayan, a female newcomer - is judged for talking to a boy, Midya felt it shows what can happen when people make assumptions about what they see. "I want people to understand that if a girl talks to a boy, smiles with him, laughs with him, that



ONE, TWO, THREE... ACTION

BULLYING SCENE

Setting: The school hallway

Two newcomer girls wearing the hijab are approached by two girls who aren't wearing the hijab. The latter start asking presumptuous questions about the hijab and the girls' reasons for wearing them. Bayan enters the scene. She jumps into the conversation, accusing the girls who aren't wearing the hijab of bullying the newcomers. They argue. A teacher intervenes, telling them to get to class and warning Bayan that he will be calling her parents about her "disruptive" behaviour.

- END SCENE

What is and isn't bullying? This scene sparked this debate. Some participants believed the actions of the non-hijab-wearing girls was bullying because it was racist. "It was racist to say that to someone. The situation was racist."

Other participants agreed it was racist, but believed there was no bad intention on the part of the girls and so was not bullying. "They didn't seem like they were trying to be mean. It's more related to a blind spot, I think." Many participants agreed that the end result – the newcomer girls feeling attacked and that they didn't belong – was the same regardless of the intent. After watching this scene, a participant shared a moment from his own life where he felt like an outsider. "Yesterday I was in the elevator in my building speaking Arabic to my mom," he said. "A woman asked me if I speak English. I said yes, and she told me to 'speak English then.' She was mad." The young man said this made him feel bad, but he didn't say anything or tell his mom what she said. "I wanted to say it's not your business and my mom doesn't speak much English. We're Muslim and that's why you're mad."

"ASSIGNING GENDER ROLES" SCENE

Setting: The school cafeteria

Bayan is talking to a male student. Her cousin, Midya, sees this and informs her brother, Alan. Alan then tells Bayan's brother, Sayed, about it, and says that it is Sayed's duty to stop Bayan. Sayed disagrees at first, but then relents after Alan taunts him about being scared.

Sayed tells the male student to leave and tells Bayan she must not talk to boys because she is a girl. They argue. Sayed walks off angry, threatening to tell their father.

- END SCENE

This scene prompted a discussion around gender roles. Participants agreed that Sayed's insistence that Bayan act a certain way because she's a girl was sexist and unfair. Challenging Sayed's view on this wasn't easy, despite the creative suggestions participants offered for Bayan to try in her conversation with Sayed.

Participants also noticed that just as Sayed was assigning gender roles to Bayan, he was also being assigned gender roles by his cousin. One participant commented that he felt this taunting by the cousin and Sayed's reaction to it was true to life and an experience he himself could relate to.



SHARING THEATRE WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

On August 9th 2018 the actors and YMCA staff reconvened at The Bus Stop Theatre for another workshop, this time for service providers.

A core principle of forum theatre is actors sharing an identity – for example, gender, race or religion – with the audience. With this workshop, where the actors were youth and the audience was not, the format was adapted to accommodate this difference. Adult audience members were able to make suggestions of changes to try, while the youth actors decided whether those suggestions were realistic. Ideas deemed realistic were then played out by the actors, not the adults, with a group discussion following.

This discussion offered an opportunity for service providers and youth to interact and share their often differing experiences with each other. Together they explored ways to change Bayan's story. It was this exchange of ideas that really stood out for Roberto Montiel. "I noticed in some scenes [I] was only reacting with my gut. But once people made suggestions I also started to think of alternatives that I hadn't seen before," said Roberto, who is from the Halifax Local Immigration Partnership. "I think that's extremely helpful."

The workshop was Roberto's first taste of forum theatre. "It's a very, very engaging way of getting people involved and participating," he said, adding that he felt the workshop could have continued on for longer with the audience still interested in learning from and listening to the youth.



SUMMARY

CREATING CHANGE TOGETHER

Through the YMCA Gender-Based Violence Prevention Project, we invited youth to participate in forum theatre workshops that got them thinking and talking about a variety of social issues including racism, sexism and Islamophobia.

The youth that participated in this project spoke to how this experience was helpful in creating a better understanding of gender-based violence and developing more empathy towards those who experience it.

The nature of Forum Theatre is that the only way to change the outcome is to change the actions of the main character. From this, other characters may react differently, resulting in a new story for the protagonist. While this emphasis on the main character using her

influence and skills to create change was empowering for youth, we acknowledge that she cannot do it alone. In real life, the other 'characters in the scenes' are also responsible for making changes, and the systems that support sexism need to be challenged by all involved: the family, peers, and the education and justice systems.

This issue was explored throughout the project. The agency of the protagonist to create change, and the awareness of how allies could be supportive, were key discussion points as the actors worked together to develop the scenes and during audience participation in the workshops. Young people also said that the workshops helped them to see ways to stand up for themselves and others.

