

# PARTICIPATORY THEATER AND THE PREVENTION OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

*Madeline Brigell*

*School of Social Service Administration*

*University of Chicago*

## **Abstract**

This paper examines gender-based violence (GBV) prevention programs in two national contexts: the United States and El Salvador. It shows how prevention programs have drawn from popular education movements in Latin America to develop curricula emphasizing participation and personal transformation. Specifically, the paper demonstrates the impact of theater-based activities on the outcomes of school-based GBV prevention programs, focusing on the case of the Equinoccio of Centro Bartolome de las Casas in San Salvador, El Salvador. The author proposes a need for further research about the longitudinal impacts of theater-based prevention programs for adolescents and men.

*My goal isn't to change, but to transform.*

— Marcos, Equinoccio participant, El Salvador

**S**ocial programs in Latin America have a long tradition of using participatory methodologies to engage marginalized groups in the transformation of their societies. Leaders and theorists from Paolo Freire in Brazil to Monseñor Oscar Romero in El Salvador have mobilized war-torn communities to engage in educational activities based in their own realities with the purpose of identifying oppression and seeking justice. In post-conflict Latin American countries, burgeoning violence prevention programs use critical pedagogy, liberation theology and popular education to healing their trauma of “dirty wars,” address the violence that continues to plague their cities, and prevent the further perpetration of violence. Many of these programs use theater as a tool to provoke community dialogue and envision a better future. In the United States, although researchers have begun to publish more studies to evaluate the effectiveness of theater

programs in working with at-risk youth and the prevention of violence, the practice remains marginal when compared to Latin America.

Practitioners in the United States have a lot to learn from examining the impacts of theater programs based in participatory education in Latin American countries. This paper therefore examines the case example of the Escuela Equinoccio (Equinox School) of Centro Bartolome de las Casas (CBC) in San Salvador.<sup>1</sup> It demonstrates the possibilities for using popular education and participatory theater as tools for the prevention of gender-based violence with adolescents in the United States. Through the example of CBC's program, the paper proposes that exploring the limitations of current constructions of masculinity with groups of men and boys using creative and participatory methods will reduce community and family violence by beginning a process of cultural change and reconsideration of what it means to be a man in our societies.

In addition to analyzing the theoretical foundations of Equinoccio and its impacts on participants, the paper reviews studies of theater programs used with teenagers in the United States, focusing on teen dating violence prevention programs. An initial review of the literature shows positive results from these programs. However, much work remains to be done in developing comprehensive theater-based violence prevention programs. Finally, the paper suggests how to integrate lessons learned from CBC's program into similar programs in the United States and proposes further research in the development, implementation and evaluation of theater-based violence prevention programs focused on the transformation of cultural norms about gender.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Before examining violence prevention programs that use theater, it is useful to review the theoretical foundations of their work, particularly around popular education, liberation theology, and participatory theater. One of the most important theorists and practitioners in the field of popular education was Paulo Freire (1974), who advocated for education programs rooted in the realities of oppressed communities with the goal not simply of learning, but taking action to transform the injustices operating in society. Freire enacted these principles in literacy programs in his native Brazil during a time of dictatorship and harsh repression of democratic freedoms. These programs have served as models for communities not only in Latin America, but in many developing countries struggling to overcome poverty and political violence.

Freire began developing his participatory education programs just as liberation theology was popularized throughout Latin America. Liberation theology empowered all people to study and interpret the Bible and

emphasized biblical themes of justice for the poor. El Salvador served as a critical source for liberation theology during the repressive dictatorships of the 1970s and the horrific civil war of the 1980s and early 90s (Hayes and Tombs 2001). Religious leaders in El Salvador encouraged poor communities to draw parallels between their own lives and those of the biblical heroes, helping them to mobilize in opposition to overcoming injustices they faced. The Salvadoran military executed many of these leaders, most famously Monseñor Oscar Romero and Ignacio Martín-Baro. Centro Bartolome de las Casas draws heavily from the tradition of liberation theology.

Participatory theater grew out of both popular education and liberation theology. Augusto Boal, a Brazilian playwright, rejected the idea of theater as an artistic form only enjoyed by the upper classes. Boal (1979) developed various techniques of performing theater with oppressed communities for the purposes of liberation and transformation. In his “poetics of the oppressed,” Boal explains, “perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely the rehearsal for the revolution” (122). To create theater with oppressed communities, Boal developed various models including image theater and forum theater. In image theater, an individual thinks of a particular problematic situation or theme and then “sculpts” the rest of his group members into an image representing that theme. First they represent the actual situation, then the ideal situation, and finally a transitional image that shows how to achieve the ideal. In forum theater, the group chooses a situation related to a social problem. They then act out a skit based on this situation. Audience members are invited to intervene in the scenario to propose a solution to the problem. Many social programs in Latin America develop interactive social dramas based on this model to increase the awareness in communities of public health problems, environmental issues and women’s rights, among other issues.

Theater has been used at a therapeutic level as well, addressing how large societal problems impact individuals and communities. Boal (1995) adapted his image theater model for use in psychiatric hospitals, working from the idea that psychic problems often originate in societal oppression. His book on this approach, *The Rainbow of Desire*, lays out a format for creating images to name internalized oppression, or what he calls the “cop in the head.” The field of theater therapy has emerged out of this seminal work. Other theories related to the acquisition of experiential knowledge, such as those developed by Gendlin, support the effectiveness of theater and role-play based activities in the integration of new skills and views about violence (Beardall 2008, 169). The programs reviewed below draw on these models and theories in their efforts to prevent gender-based violence.

## THE UNITED STATES CONTEXT

In teen-dating violence and sexual-assault prevention programs in the United States, some programs utilize performances of formal theater productions to educate youth about the issue of violence while others use role-play and skits developed by participants themselves to delve more deeply into situations of violence in their own lives.

A number of researchers have analyzed the impacts of teen dating violence prevention programs on knowledge about healthy relationships and future acts of violence of participants. Weisz and Black (2001, 89-100) studied the results of a 12-week long intervention with African-American junior high school students in Michigan. Partnering with the local Rape Crisis Center, they implemented a curriculum called "Reaching and Teaching Teens to Stop Violence," covering topics such as gender definitions and roles, healthy relationships, sexual harassment, dating violence and sexual assault. The program used a variety of techniques including discussion as well as role-play and experiential activities. The researchers found that the program increased knowledge about these topics and improved attitudes of both boys and girls who participated. Ting (2009, 328-337) conducted a meta-analysis of 13 dating violence programs targeted towards junior high school and high school age youth. He found overall increases in knowledge and attitudes about dating violence as a result of participating in such programs. A key component for successful programs mentioned in one of the studies was the use of a variety of teaching methods, including experiential education as well as didactic learning. These studies point to the importance of theater and role-play in teen dating violence prevention programs.

Many sexual assault and teen dating violence prevention programs focus on the need to change larger cultural norms about gender and masculinity. One example is the Mentors in Violence Program (MVP). The MVP program is a peer education model where high-school age mentors facilitate workshops about gender identity and violence for junior-high school students (Beardall 2008, 169). The mentors go through an extensive training and then discuss the following topics with their younger peers: sexist language, gender representations in the media, the role of the bystander in violence prevention, healthy relationships and dating violence. The MVP program involves mentors scripting and acting out scenarios. At one high school in Massachusetts, developing skits about issues such as peer pressure gave participants ownership over the process as well as involved spectators in dynamic discussions throughout the interactive performance. Beardall found participation in such performances increases awareness about sexual harassment, comfort levels of discussing sexual harassment and the likelihood of intervening in such situations as bystanders.

Although theater is just a small part of many of the programs outlined above, its effectiveness has been demonstrated in preventing violence and other risky behaviors in youth. In analyzing the impacts of a live drama production on students in preventing domestic violence, Bessard (2000, 102) reviewed the literature about the ways theater can impact the behaviors of youth. Theater presentations have been shown to improve attitudes of youth about risky behaviors by presenting models of desired behaviors. Interactive dramas further impact behavioral outcomes by actively involving the youth in the production through discussions with characters as to what decisions they should make in the scenario. In terms of violence prevention, role-playing both encourages youth to seek help if involved in violent relationships and to rehearse interventions with friends and relatives.

Because of the paucity of research directly correlating participation in theater programs to positive outcomes with youth, Zwerling (2008) set out to study the long-term impacts of theater programs on both the attitudes and behaviors of at-risk youth. To do this, he observed 3 different theater programs over the course of 2 years, interviewed participants and conducted surveys with them. One of the programs, City at Peace, engaged youth in creating plays under the rubric of Boal's theater of the oppressed. They sought to "empower, encourage, change, unify, and bring about acceptance in our community by opening eyes to the problems of violence and prejudice that go on every day" (Zwerling 2008). The scripts, written and performed by the youth themselves, addressed problems they experience in their daily lives, including violence and sexual harassment. In terms of effectiveness, Zwerling found that teens who participated in the theater programs had significantly lower levels of participation in risky behaviors than the national averages. As Zwerling notes, participatory theater programs help give teens ownership over decision-making in their lives and increase their responsibility for their own success.

## THE SALVADORAN CONTEXT

As noted above, participatory education, liberation theology and theater of the oppressed all developed within a Latin American context. They all served as important tools of resistance during the civil war and recovery after the war. CBC builds on this tradition by using Forum Theater and other participatory education techniques in their Masculinities workshops, which they gave the name, Escuela Equinoccio (Equinox School). The founders of the program chose to address the issue of gender-based violence because of its pervasiveness in Salvadoran society. Most recently, during the civil war, over 80,000 people were killed and half a million displaced, not to mention those who were brutally tortured, fought in armed combat or lost family members to war atrocities (Madrigal 2009). This violence continues in the present day. El Salvador is home to two of the most infamous gangs

in world, the *maras* and the *maras* Salvatrucha. According to the website *ContraPunto*, in 2008, the country had the highest murder rate in the hemisphere at 60 per 100,000 and murders have increased by 37% in 2009. Moreover, gang violence, post-conflict trauma and a culture of *machismo* have all contributed to the rise in gender-based violence in the country.

To address the issue of violence, CBC explores the problematic ways in which men have been socialized to act out their masculinity. The Equinoccio facilitators work intensively with five groups of men, women and adolescent boys each year, between the spring and fall equinoxes, to explore what it means to be a man in their society, the origins of conflicts, sexuality, relationships and self-care. The groups participate in four retreats, each four days long. The goals of the workshops are to build trust and confidentiality within the group, connect participants' emotions with their effects on the body and reflect as a group on how they construct masculine identity in everyday life (Tejeda and Madrigal 2009). To accomplish this, CBC uses participatory activities such as cooperative games, group drawings, dance movement, forum theater, film, meditation and discussion. All of these activities help participants reflect both upon their experiences being a man and how the dominant model of masculinity perpetuates gender-based violence. Most of the participants work as social workers, youth leaders, teachers or government officials and the program encourage each one to spread what they have learned to their communities and workplaces. With this multiplying effect, CBC hopes to change cultural norms about masculinity that maintain gender inequality and violence.

The methodologies used by Equinoccio facilitators in the workshops very effectively draw out participants' experiences of gender, masculinity and violence, particularly through the games and theater exercises. By involving the groups of men and adolescents in soccer matches and other games learned in childhood such as cops and robbers, participants recognize that violence is taught from a very early age. According to Walberto Tejeda, coordinator of the Masculinities program,

We are working a lot with games as a concept and as a recreational activity. They aren't ingenuous or innocent proposals, but each game has a message, sustains some values or principles that we're interested in examining to find out how we've constructed from games a masculine identity. These games help us to learn, to socialize ourselves to violence and to exert it. These games have huge power as a methodology and as a pedagogy of work and in the case of men it's fundamental. (Nuñez 2009)

Indeed, out of all the activities of the workshops, these games make the strongest impacts on Equinoccio participants. In a series of interviews agency staff and I conducted this summer with 9 men and male youth, all spoke about the affects these games had on them. One of the participants,

a 19-year-old named Marco,<sup>2</sup> said, "All of these games have been violent but also they make you realize that from the age when we are children, we come to understand what is violence, what is machismo and it's something that once grown up is difficult to change. Yes, it's the games which have most affected me here" (Ruiz 2009). Another adult participant, Oscar, said about the games, "it's very interesting because I don't consider myself to be a violent person but when we were playing these violent games in the first workshop, an aggressiveness came out of me from I don't know where. This is something I had never discovered in myself" (Mejia 2009). Thus, engaging in these childhood games draws out of the men how it is that they have been socialized to violence.

Not only did participants play games, but they also acted out situations of violence using image and forum theater (Brigell 2009). While working with CBC this summer, I had the opportunity to observe these sessions in both the adult and youth workshops. In the youth workshop, the participants broke into three smaller groups to come up with situations in which violence occurs in everyday life. The groups then performed their skits without words or sound. After the groups performed, the audience members described what happened while the actors remained silent. The groups then performed their skits with voices and sound. The facilitator stopped the skits at the point where conflict broke out and asked the actors to remain frozen in an image. He then gave the audience a chance to ask questions of the actors. The facilitator asked audience members who was the most oppressed person in the image, the worst affected, and the most discriminated against. He then asks if the conflict could have been avoided. To demonstrate how the conflict might have been avoided, the facilitator invited an audience member to replace one of the actors, "rewind the cassette" and rework the scene.

One group performed a scene in which a man drove up to a group of sex workers in San Salvador. He sat down with them and they began caressing him. As he caressed one of the women, he realized she was a transvestite. He then began to yell at her and beat her until the police came and dragged him away. The facilitator directed the participants and audience members to examine their reactions to the skit. As the boys came out dressed as women, the audience members began to whistle and make jokes. The facilitator pointed out that jokes legitimize many acts of violence. He also brought to the attention of audience members how they legitimized violence through blaming women for wearing miniskirts, blaming alcohol for drunken men's violence towards women, and saying that women provoked the men into abusing them.

This example of forum theater shows how powerful theater can be in helping groups of men and male youth come to realize how they contribute to systems of gender violence and oppression. In Boal's terms, these sessions are rehearsals for finding better ways of handling conflicts.

Participatory activities such as games and theater actively engaged workshop participants in the topics of violence and gender than mere discussions would have done. In the interviews, all respondents found the methodologies used by CBC to be more innovative than other workshops they had participated in related to gender and violence prevention. Carlos, an adult participant who is a forensic psychologist, said:

In my opinion, this is a very appropriate and adequate methodology that should be used by other organizations and institutions. This way of learning, through participation, reflection, and sharing personal experiences is one of the best ways to learn about the topics of gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence. Compared to other methodologies that are more like presentations or theoretical but aren't grounded in the experience of each person, this seems to me much more effective in terms of learning. (Montenegro 2009)

Many of the men discussed how their participation had changed their perspective on gender roles in their relationships with friends, coworkers, children and partners. Oscar discussed how he is more conscious of the hurtful impact the jokes he makes have on his partner. Another adult participant, Lionel, mentioned the changes he is making in his relationship with his partner:

She can testify to the changes that I have gone through. I'm leaving behind the macho man who yells, dominates and demands. Sometimes he comes out, the masculine hegemonic model comes out, setting me back. But this ogre now comes in second. When he comes back, he hides. And there is shame and regret. My consciousness has been raised. (Garcia 2009)

The youth often mentioned how the workshops have affected their romantic relationships. One of the youth facilitators of Equinoccio, said, "There were months when I changed girlfriends two or three times, or when I thought it was possible to go out with 3 or 4 girls. My girlfriend saw the changes in me [after my participation in the Equinoccio]. I came to understand how to appreciate her. I consider her a woman who deserves respect now" (Nuñez 2009).

The workshops also helped participants envision ways to transform violence they perpetrate in their own lives. Jorge discussed how the workshop affected his ability to control his anger:

This workshop has helped me most with my character because I have been a bit violent in reacting to situations that aren't in accordance with my way of thinking... Now in this moment I try to apply more tolerance and comprehension with other people. This in fact gives me more patience and allows me to maintain a more positive emotional state. (Delgado 2009)



Jorge also discussed the impacts on his life of one role-playing activity in which participants engaged in mock arguments with a partner about everyday problems at home and work:

You gain a new comprehension through this experiential workshop. It helps you realize that in the moment before you react in a certain situation, you can reflect if this is a good or a bad response. I mean, it's a shock of consciousness that you have before reacting. This is important. (Delgado 2009)

Through this activity, Jorge not only recognized his own tendencies to react when angry, but also had the opportunity of practicing new ways of handling such situations.

Although these interviews and evaluations show the impacts of the masculinities program on participants, they also have limitations to their accuracy because they are self-reported. They may not always represent actual changes made in daily life related to gender and masculinity. The interviewees had an interest in presenting themselves positively for the interviewers. Also, the evaluations do not account for long-term impacts of the program, as they were conducted during the course of the workshops. The participants themselves admitted to some of the difficulties in integrating what they experienced in the workshop into their daily lives. "It's not something that changes overnight. It's not magic," said Felix, one of the youth participants (Gonzales 2009). "The violence I have inside is extremely heavy, I carry it with me. It's not easy to leave behind." However, the preliminary anecdotal evidence gathered from interviews and evaluation activities demonstrates the profound impact participatory games and theater activities have had on Equinox Schol participants in their level of commitment to achieving gender equality and preventing gender-based violence.

## TOWARDS INTEGRATION: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EQUINOCCIO

Evaluating the use of theater and participatory activities in violence prevention programs demonstrates the enormous need for further research. Although many theater programs exist for youth, few focus primarily on teen dating violence prevention or the harmful effects of masculine gender norms. Additionally, in prevention programs such as MVP, the Michigan pilot program, and the Equinoccio, no direct correlation has been shown between use of particular techniques such as theater, games and role plays and the decrease in violent behaviors or attitudes.

CBC's Equinoccio could be used as a model for similar programs in the United States. Because of their great success and innovation in working with groups of men to create acceptance of the diversity of the masculine experience, groups all over Latin America have begun implementing

similar masculinities workshops with the technical assistance of CBC's staff. Participants in Equinoccio have benefited from the participatory methodologies used in the workshops, including games and theater. Integrating the model of the Equinoccio with universal school-based teen-dating violence programs for both boys and girls would greatly impact the level of violence teens experience in their relationships. It would also help to continue the process of changing gender norms about men and violence. More such programs involving participatory theater should be implemented and evaluated longitudinally in order to demonstrate their impacts on youth and on cultural norms about gender and masculinity that perpetuate violence against women.

As Zwerling and Beardall note, various types of interactive theater have great potential to increase participants' sense of collective responsibility to prevent violence from occurring (Beardall 2008, 169; Zwerling 2008). Ignacio Martin-Baro (1986), the well-known psychologist and Jesuit priest murdered 20 years ago by the Salvadoran military, wrote about the need for a collective re-orientation after the effects of a 12-year civil war. Mental health professionals needed, he wrote, to break out of traditional modes of practice and "involve ourselves in a new praxis, an activity of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is but also about what is not, and by which we may try to orient ourselves towards what ought to be." The CBC program draws much of its methodology from Baro's ideas of liberation theology and transformation of violence. Although teen dating violence prevention programs in the United States have begun implementing experiential learning into their work, incorporating participatory theater and interactive games such as those used in Equinoccio could provoke deeper changes on an individual and societal level about masculine gender norms and violence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This research was approved by the SSA-Chapin Hall IRB of the University of Chicago (Protocol #10-015).

<sup>2</sup>All names have been changed.

## REFERENCES

- Beardall, Nancy. 2008. *A program evaluation research study on the implementation of the mentors in violence prevention program in a public high school*. PhD diss., Lesley University.
- Bessard, Lisa Monica. 2000. *The effectiveness of using live theater for domestic violence prevention among school-age youth*. M.P.H. thesis, California State University, Fresno.
- Boal, Augusto. 1995. *The rainbow of desire: The Boal method of theatre and therapy*. London: New York: Routledge.

- . 1979. *Theater of the oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books.
- Brigell, Madeline. 2009. Field notes, El Salvador.
- Delgado, Jorge. August 24, 2009. Interview with author and staff, El Salvador.
- Freire, Paulo. 1974. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Garcia, Lionel. August 17, 2009. Interview with author and staff, El Salvador.
- Gonzales, Felix. July 17, 2009. Interview with author and staff, El Salvador.
- Hayes, Michael A., and David Tombs, eds. 2001. *Truth and memory: The church and human rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*. Leominster: Gracewing.
- Madrigal, Larry J. 2009. Tan duro como el acantilado: Imágenes para provocar en masculinidades. Paper presented at INTEC, Centro de Estudios de Género, Seminario sobre Masculinidad y Violencia, October 22 in Santo Domingo, República Dominicana.
- Martín-Baró, Ignacio. 1994. Toward a liberation psychology. In *Writings for a liberation psychology*, eds. Ignacio Martín-Baró, Adrienne Aron and Shawn Corne, p. 17-32. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Mejia, Oscar. August 24, 2009. Interview with author and staff, El Salvador.
- Montenegro, Carlos. August 24, 2009. Interview with author and staff, El Salvador.
- Núñez, Extor. 2009. *Masculinidades: Todo sobre el equinoccio*. San Salvador, El Salvador.
- Ruiz, Marco. July 29, 2009. Interview with author and staff, El Salvador.
- Tejeda, Walberto V., and Larry J. Madrigal. Escuela equinoccio: Programa de masculinidades. 2009. Retrieved November 25 2009. <http://www.escuelaequinoccio.org/?cat=8>.
- Ting, Siu-Man Raymond. 2009. Meta-analysis on dating violence prevention among middle and high schools. *Journal of School Violence* 8(4): 328-37.
- Weisz, Arlene, and Beverly M. Black. 2001. Evaluating a sexual assault and dating violence prevention program for urban youths. *Social Work Research* 25(2): 89-100.
- Zwerling, Philip. 2008. *After-school theatre programs for at-risk teenagers*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madeline Brigell is a second-year student at the School of Social Service Administration. She currently counsels child and adult victims of sex crimes and their families at the Cook County State's Attorney's Office and is particularly interested in trauma recovery. Previously, she volunteered as a group facilitator for at-risk youth in Managua, Nicaragua and war trauma survivors in Arcatao, El Salvador. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a B.A. in history and women's studies.