

DECIDES EUROPE

Preventing gender-based violence. The youth outlook.

Handout: Forum theatre on gender-based violence

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This handout provides basic information and suggestions on how to conduct forum theatre workshops with young people to prevent and address gender-based violence. The Interarts Foundation has written this comprehensive handout draft, which includes a selection of the best methodological practices that Trabe (Spain) and Transcena (Romania) used during their forum theatre workshops. For further information, please visit <https://decideseurope.net/en/>



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Introduction

The aim of this handout is to provide basic information, reference and tips on training and workshops aimed at school staff, including teachers, workshop facilitators and trainers, to help them use forum theatre as a tool to address gender-based violence (GBV) and related issues such as gender equality, women's empowerment and domestic violence.

The content draws on over 30 years of experience among the consortium in defending women's human rights and social transformation through arts and culture in several countries in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. This experience includes the [DECIDES Programme](#) (Cultural Rights for Health Promotion and Development).

This handout has been written as part of [DECIDES Europe](#), a project that seeks to reduce GBV in three European countries: Denmark, Romania, and Spain. Launched in September 2018, it aims to raise the awareness of young people about all forms of GBV, as well as its causes and consequences, and provide tools to prevent, recognise and counter it.

The handout brings together methodologies used in schools in three cities: College Matei Basarab in Bucharest (Romania), Instituto Bernat Metge in Barcelona and ElBrot in Madrid (Spain). The beneficiaries of the project are pupils aged 15 to 18; school staff including teachers, counsellors and school managers; parents, and vulnerable groups such as young people and young migrants. By disseminating the project outputs, which include theatre performances, an exhibition, videos, an international conference and talks with parents, and promoting the campaign on social media, the project will also increase awareness of sexual and GBV topics among pupils and adults around them.

DECIDES Europe is part of the DECIDES programme framework created by the Interarts Foundation to focus on improving the health and wellbeing of people through cultural cooperation for development and by generating spaces for reflection harnessing experiences from the field.

DECIDES Europe is implemented by Interarts and Trabe (Spain), Transcena (Romania) and Kvindemuseet (Denmark) and co-funded by the European Union under the Equality, Rights and Citizenship programme.

What is forum theatre?

Forum theatre was devised by Augusto Boal in the early 1970s as a tool for reflection and social transformation, using theatre to achieve social aims. Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed method – an interactive form of theatre with the aim of helping the audience identify their “internal oppressions” to begin to overcome them.

This a type of theatre encourages audience interaction and explores options to address a problem or conflict. Forum theatre is often used by socially excluded and disempowered groups. Due to its participatory nature, forum theatre is an excellent way of working with young people to raise awareness of and tackle social issues. In this case, it allows young people to explore GBV-related problems they may be facing in a safe space and try to overcome them using a participative method.

Forum theatre starts with a short performance in which a central character (lead) encounters a form of oppression or an obstacle which s/he is unable to overcome. The subject-matter will usually be something of immediate importance to the audience, often based on a shared life experience.

After the performance, the audience can take to the stage and suggest alternative ways for the lead to behave. The event can be used to rehearse for an imminent occasion, or to uncover and analyse alternatives in any past, present or future situation.

The spectators are therefore transformed into ‘spect-actors’, who not only observe but also act to change the scenes they are shown. The actors explore the results of the choices with the audience, creating a kind of debate in which experiences and ideas are rehearsed and shared, and generating both solidarity and a sense of empowerment.

**actor* + spectator = SPECTACTOR*

There are certain rules in forum theatre performances:

- The forum theatre scenario is created from participants' real experiences.
- The script has clear characters and situations that the audience can recognise.
- At least one lead proposes the situation, involving at least one social conflict in order to be relevant for the forum-type discussion.
- Various genres of drama may be used (such as realism, symbolism, expressionism, etc.), but others such as surreal and irrational are not appropriate because the purpose of the performance is to discuss specific situations and problems.

Tips for facilitators:

The facilitator will ideally have experience of forum theatre methodology and must remain neutral during the performance.

Begin the process creating group cohesion by doing warm-up games and exercises with participants (non-actors) using emotions, physical, sensory, memory and imagination activities (e.g. musical chairs, the mirror, the puppet and puppeteer, imitating others, etc.). Play these games periodically at every stage during the forum theatre process with the actors.

Difficulties may arise during the performance, such as:

- Spectators reinforcing stereotypes and being verbally violent,
- Spectators who do not want to complete their part or stay until the end.

The facilitator must always try to find solutions on the spot so that the performance can continue.

Each group creates its own rules based on the principles of wellbeing, freedom, and collective responsibility for every member of the group. It must also be made clear that we think about violence but do not accept any form of violence.

Examples of group rules

All members have an equal position in the group, which is reflected by sitting in a circle for group discussions. It is important to ensure good posture when sitting or standing.

We listen to everyone's opinions. All members of the group can make proposals. We offer feedback.

We do not use emotional, physical, or verbal violence. We do not use exercises and improvisation to mask violence. We do not use irony or insult if it is supposedly a joke.

We speak in turn, expressing verbal, assertive, dissatisfaction.

It is also important to keep in mind a few limitations to make the forum theatre effective:

- The facilitator is not the author. The scenario is co-created using proposals from the lead characters.
- The artistic director's role is to produce a performance in which the leads and audience recognise the theme and issues. However, issues must not be portrayed in such an extreme manner that there are no alternatives possible, such as the lead

character being held at gun point. This would leave the performance with a sense of helplessness and loss.

- The script-writing process must be free from prejudice. It is important to remember that all oppressions are of equal importance, as are the people subject to them.

Addressing limitations and reflecting on the facilitator's role requires continuous efforts to ensure that the goals set at the beginning of the process can be achieved.

Forum theatre objectives

The aim of forum theatre is to raise awareness about social issues through drama. Within the scope of the DECIDES Europe project, the objectives are as follows:

General objective:

Identify and raise awareness about gender inequalities and violence experienced by women in their daily lives using social theatre as a learning tool.



Specific objectives:

- Recognise gender conflicts and imagine possible solutions through body creativity techniques.
- Generate social and personal transformation processes through corporal and discursive tools.
- Activate collective training processes based on accompaniment and mutual support practices.
- Acquire knowledge about artistic methodologies and creative physical expression that help analyse the gender component in everyday situations.
- Generate a space for empathetic and active listening with trust, complicity, and safety.
- Build on peer learning as a strategy to move towards a 'culture of learning and collaboration' and a dimension that strengthens leadership.

Workshops

Social conflict is at the heart of the theatre forum workshop concept, so we address the issues surrounding gender-based violence with pupils in the workshops. To do so we have used the following methodology, which is adapted to young people's needs and surroundings.

The sessions are divided into two parts: introductory sessions, and script-writing and improvisation. The aim of the introduction is to connect to the pupils and set group rules. It entails body dynamics and warm-up games to get used to using body language and create a sense of group complicity. This helps pupils' transition to the second part where the aim is to create a script based on participants' experiences that they then validate.

It is important to recall that forum theatre workshops are very fluid and require ongoing adjustments to the needs of each group, according to the group dynamics, responses to situations and reactions to the script.

At the start of the process, the team of facilitators should ensure that all pupils are comfortable in the group. Some may be shy and self-conscious in a large group. Warm-up exercises are very important at this stage. These are full-body physical, facial, and vocal exercises that help participants get ready to perform. A good warm-up will help pupils find the right physical, mental, and emotional state to go on stage and work well with other participants. It helps them to relax, allay any anxieties and prepare the voice to perform.



Pupils from INS Bernat Metge (Barcelona) taking part in workshops.

Examples of warm-up techniques include vocal exercises like humming, tongue twisters, lip trills and flutters, and physical warm-ups like stretching, movement exercises and breathwork. In addition, fun brain activation games can be used to attract pupils' attention and get them moving.

Theatre exercises are utilised from the beginning as it is important to bear in mind that the overall aim is a performance. They also help pupils to keep their energy up and develop their improvisation skills.

Along with drama techniques, it is also important to work on the concept of gender-based violence with pupils. Role reversal exercises are a good way to introduce the themes of feminine and masculine roles in society.

Depending on the group, these exercises can repeat as often as necessary until the pupils are comfortable and engaged in the process with their body, mind, and feelings.

When the participating pupils are more accustomed to the theme of gender-based violence and the forum theatre as a process, work can begin on creating the script. The facilitators ensure that the scenes are true to the pupils' experiences and help them to identify themes and put themselves in the place of the characters to develop the overall argument. The script is built up by analysing and reviewing it from time to time, discussing the existing conflict and characters' motivations.

Each actor has only a few fixed lines and knows when they enter and leave the scene, and when the conflict is at its peak. From these few lines, they are encouraged to create scenes and can come up with new lines and change them, depending on how they feel.

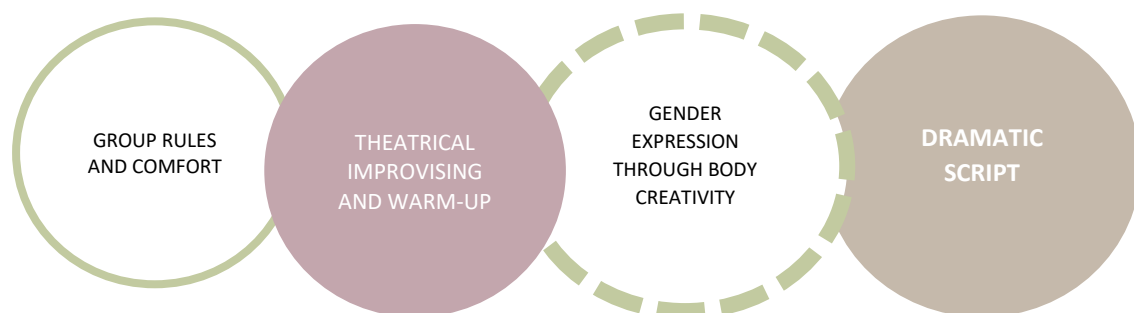
Improvisation skills are key to forum theatre exercises. The facilitator must encourage the participating pupils by asking leading questions with the aim of creating a safe space to talk about specific situations, cases and how the pupils feel, as well as to determine whether there is really a problem.

EXAMPLES OF LEADING QUESTIONS

- Think about a time you were prevented from doing something you wanted to do or forced to do something you did not.
- Why do you think you acted as you did?
- What can you do to change the scenario?
- How this affects your feelings as a woman?

While developing the script it is important to continue the dialogue about gender-based violence, gender-based discrimination and stereotypical gender roles to understand the ideas and reasons behind them.

Human beings think with their entire body, so the entire body must be using when finding alternatives to the participants' unresolved conflicts. Games for body and voice relaxation must be carried out whenever necessary during the process.



The forum theatre methodology was an excellent way to raise participants' awareness. Pupils were able to express personal conflicts and receive support and understanding from their classmates, creating a space of great solidarity and strong ties between them. By sharing personal conflicts, pupils were also able to resolve some of them, showing the need for more spaces in which young people can address personal issues in the school setting.

Definitions

Gender: a social and cultural construct which distinguishes differences in the attributes of men and women, and girls and boys, and accordingly refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Gender interacts with, but is different from, the binary categories of biological sex. Gender-based roles and other attributes, therefore, change over time and vary with different cultural contexts. The concept of gender includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). This concept is useful in analysing how commonly shared practices legitimise discrepancies between sexes (2017; UNICEF).

Gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes, and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men. Gender also refers to the relationships between people and can reflect the distribution of power within those relationships. Gender intersects with other drivers of inequities, discrimination, marginalization, and social exclusion, which have complex effects on health and well-being. These intersectional drivers include ethnicity, class, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographical location, sexual orientation, and sexual identity (2018; WHO).

Gender accommodating: similar to the concept of gender sensitivity, gender accommodating means not only being aware of gender differences but also adjusting and adapting to those differences. However, gender accommodating does not address the inequalities generated by unequal norms, roles, and relations (i.e., no remedial or transformative action is developed) (2017; UNICEF).

Gender-based violence (GBV): gender-based violence is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between females and males. The nature and extent of specific types of GBV vary across cultures, countries and regions. Examples include sexual violence, including sexual exploitation/abuse and forced prostitution; domestic violence; trafficking; forced/early marriage; harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation; honour killings, and widow inheritance (2017; UNICEF). Violence takes various forms, including (but not limited to) physical, verbal, sexual, psychological and socioeconomic violence:

Physical violence is an intentional act to cause pain and/or physical injury. It includes beating, burning, kicking, punching, biting, maiming, using objects or weapons, and tearing hair out. At its most extreme, physical violence may lead to femicide, i.e. the gender-based killing of a woman. Some classifications also categorise trafficking and slavery as physical violence because there is often initial coercion, and the victims are subject to further violence as a result of their enslavement.

Verbal violence can include put-downs in private or in public; ridiculing; using obscene language that offends the other and threatening to use other forms of violence on the victim or a loved one. Verbal abuse may also be related to background by insulting or threatening the victim on the grounds of religion, culture, language, (perceived) sexual orientation or traditions.

Sexual violence encompasses multiple acts that range from verbal harassment to forced penetration, and an array of types of coercion, from social pressure and intimidation to physical force. All forms of sexual violence are hurtful and may be enacted in the public or private sphere. Examples include rape (sexual violence including some form of penetration of the victim's body without consent), marital rape and attempted rape. Other types of sexual violence are forcing a person to watch sexual intercourse; forcing a person to have intercourse in front of others; forcing unprotected sex; sexual harassment; and, in the case of women, abuse related to reproduction (forced pregnancy, forced abortion and forced sterilisation).

Psychological gender-based violence is any act that causes emotional harm and targets someone because of their gender. It can entail threatening behaviours that do not necessarily involve physical or verbal violence. Some examples include controlling or restricting someone's movements, threatening, wilfully ignoring, verbally disrespecting and degrading another person.

Socioeconomic violence is both a cause and an effect of dominant gender power relations in societies. Some of the most typical forms of socioeconomic violence include taking away the victim's earnings, preventing her from having a separate income (forced 'housewife' status or working for the family business without a salary), or making her unfit for work through targeted physical abuse. In the public sphere, it may include denying access to education or (equally) paid work; denying access to services; exclusion from certain jobs, and denying the enjoyment and exercise of civil, cultural, social, or political rights.

Spiritual violence involves underestimating or diminishing the importance of satisfying moral/spiritual needs by prohibiting, limiting, ridiculing or penalising the aspirations of family members and their access to cultural, ethnic, linguistic or religious values; denying the right to speak in the mother tongue and to teach children to speak in the mother tongue; imposing adherence to unacceptable spiritual and religious beliefs and practices, and other actions with similar effects or repercussions.

Domestic violence, also known as ‘domestic abuse’ or ‘intimate partner violence’ can be defined as a pattern of behaviour used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. The abuse may entail physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions, including any behaviour that frightens, intimidates, terrorises, manipulates, hurts, humiliates, blames, injures or wounds.

Domestic abuse can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. It can occur in various set-ups, including couples who are married, living together, or dating. It affects people from all socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of education. Victims of domestic abuse may also include a child or other relative, or any other household member.

Gender-based violence in emergencies (GBViE): in emergencies such as conflict or natural disasters, the risk of violence, exploitation and abuse is heightened, particularly for women and girls. At the same time, national systems and community and social support networks may weaken. An environment of impunity may mean that perpetrators are not held to account. Pre-existing gender inequalities may be exacerbated. Women and adolescent girls are often at particular risk of sexual violence, exploitation, and abuse, forced or early marriage, denial of resources and harmful traditional practices. Men and boys may also be survivors. GBV has significant and long-lasting impacts on the health and psychological, social, and economic well-being of survivors and their families (2017; UNICEF).

Gender blindness: the failure to recognise that the roles and responsibilities of men/boys and women/girls are given to them in specific social, cultural, economic, and political contexts and backgrounds. Projects, programmes, policies and attitudes which are gender blind do not consider these different roles and diverse needs, maintain status quo, and will not help transform the unequal structure of gender relations (2017; UNICEF).

Gender discrimination: any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

Discrimination can stem from both law (‘de jure’) or from practice (‘de facto’).

- de jure discrimination: e.g., in some countries, a woman is not allowed to leave the country or hold a job without the consent of her husband.
- de facto discrimination: e.g., a man and woman may hold the same job position and perform the same duties, but their benefits may differ (2017; UNICEF).

Direct discrimination: where one person is treated less favourably on the grounds of sex than another person is, has been or would be treated in a comparable situation. The European Court of Justice has ruled that as only women can become pregnant, refusing to employ, or dismissing a pregnant woman based on pregnancy or maternity amounts to direct discrimination on the grounds of sex. On the basis of this principle, the Court has

further held that any unfavourable treatment directly or indirectly connected to pregnancy or maternity constitutes direct sex discrimination (2010; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights & Council of Europe).

Indirect discrimination: the situation where a seemingly neutral provision, criterion or practice would in particular disadvantage persons of a particular sex with respect to persons of the other sex, unless this provision, criterion or practice is justified objectively for a legitimate purpose, and the means to achieve this goal are appropriate and necessary (2010; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights & Council of Europe).

Gender roles: social and behavioural norms which, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex. These often determine the traditional responsibilities and tasks assigned to men, women, boys, and girls. Gender-specific roles are often conditioned by household structure, access to resources, specific impacts of the global economy, occurrence of conflict or disaster, and other locally relevant factors such as ecological conditions (2017; UNICEF).

Gender-stereotyping: ascribing certain attributes, characteristics and roles to people based on their gender. Gender stereotypes can be negative (i.e., women are bad drivers, men cannot change diapers) and benign (i.e., women are better caregivers, men are stronger). Gender stereotyping becomes harmful when it limits a person's life choices, such as training and professional path, and life plans. Compounded gender stereotypes occur when layered with stereotypes about other characteristics of the person, such as disability, ethnicity, or social status (2017; UNICEF).

Sexism: the belief that a one sex is superior to the other, for example, a man who thinks that women are too emotional, or a woman who thinks that men are chauvinists (2005; US EEOC).

Sexual harassment: any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another. Sexual harassment may occur when it interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment. It can include a one-off incident or a series of incidents. Sexual harassment may be deliberate, unsolicited and coercive. Both male and female colleagues can either be the victim or offender. Sexual harassment may also occur outside the workplace and/or outside working hours.

Sexual harassment includes many things such as actual or attempted rape or sexual assault, unwanted pressure for sexual favours, unwanted sexual teasing or remarks, cat calls and whistling at someone, unwanted deliberate touching, leaning over, cornering and pinching, among others (2005; UNHCR).

Unwelcome behaviour is a critical term. Unwelcome does not mean 'involuntary'. A victim may consent or agree to certain conduct and actively participate in it, even though it is offensive and objectionable. Therefore, sexual conduct is unwelcome whenever the person subjected to it considers it unwelcome (1992; BNA Communications Inc.; SDC IP .73).

Violence against women: any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. It encompasses, but is not limited to physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere; trafficking in women and forced prostitution; and physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs (1993; UN).

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