

REPORT

Open Studio Performance Showcase & Feedback

Under Stepping Stones: Engaging with Youth in South Asia on Sexual Violence And Impunity & Body of Evidence Project

June 16, 2019

NeThing, Guwahati

The one-day Open Studio was envisaged as a space to showcase performances and works in progress as part of the Zubaan Stepping Stones project supported by IDRC and Goethe Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan. The overall objective of the project is to take forward discussions with young audiences on sexual violence and impunity through theatre and other performing arts.

Format:

Each presentation was about 15-20 minutes, followed by a feedback session of about 15-20 minutes. Feedback was provided by all participants/performers as well as some content specialists and potential facilitators.

1. Gulal Salil: Documentary on Sexual Harassment in the Academia

Gulal shared a PowerPoint presentation on his proposal. He decided to build on his journalism background to tell a story via a documentary which he has tentatively titled 'Due Process: A Legacy vs Life Situation'. He will explore notions of sexual violence and sexual harassment in the student community through documenting testimonies of his peers in college. Approaching the subject through his own location as a student, he will document the process of speaking out against sexual harassment at his alma mater, Symbiosis Institute. He will trace the process of students speaking out against a specific person in authority; their experiences of breaking the silence; the impact of the complaints and the ensuing debates within the academic community.

Discussion

There was some discussion around the title itself – 'Legacy' and Gulal clarified that it was based on the Instagram story-voting mechanism/game of voting for 'legacy' (a person's name/reputation and work) weighed against the 'life' of the complainant and her experience.

One point that came up was that the personality of the accused and details of the cases should not distract from the main theme of sexual violence and institutional power, and the ways in which sexual harassment operates in educational institutions with their rigid hierarchies.

A concern was raised about maintaining anonymity of complainants and respecting their privacy even as they choose to break their silence via the medium of the film. These ethical concerns would need to be carefully thought through.

A suggestion was to address the film also to perpetrators of sexual harassment – what would a person accused of sexual harassment take away after watching the film, for example? What do men in general feel? Can we explore the bystander phenomenon too, by talking to students who were part of the community at the time of the incidents?

Another suggestion was to use Instagram to curate experiences documented for purposes of the film.

2. Karry Padu: Documentary on polygamy in Arunachal Pradesh

The group was represented by Karry Padu and Yomge Chisi.

Karry intends to make a documentary about polygamy, an issue that affects a majority of women of her tribe, the Galo. Her power point presentation provided a background of the socio-economic and cultural practices of the Tani clan, of which the Galo are a part. The proposed documentary, 'I am Property' will attempt to link the issues of sexual violence, insecurity and the lack of land rights for women.



The film will comprise testimonies of 'victims' of polygamy, trying to portray them not as victims alone. The process will also take care to address issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Data from the Women's Commission and experts on the subject will also be used.

Discussion

An idea shared from the perspective of the craft of theatre was to draw attention to the physicality of positioning. Where the interviewer locates herself in relation to the interviewee requires self-awareness, since physical position – sitting/standing – impacts on the extent to which the interviewee is portrayed as a 'victim'.

There was a recognition that such a sensitive topic could only be brought up by someone from within the community lest it fall prey to stereotypes and cultural essentialism.

The suggestion to locate polygamy as one expression of an intensely patriarchal society, as well as a symbol of power and prestige also pointed to the need to look at the lack of space for single women in Arunachali society in general.

Looking at the role of quasi-judicial bodies like the 'kebang' which are also patriarchal and exclude women, would be one way to examine social dimensions of impunity, it was felt.

There was also a suggestion to look at the history of women's mobilisation against customary laws, the context of the right-wing co-option of the demand for a Uniform Civil Code in the early 1990s, post the demolition of the Babri Masjid and locating the analysis of polygamy and customary practices within the present wave of Hindu majoritarianism.

One suggestion was to approach customary law in which the practice of polygamy was embedded, as a 'performative archive', where the repetition of the act rendered symbolic power. So, a question that would emerge is: how can this performance of polygamy be 'reframed'?

3. Jirseong, Guwahati

The group was represented by Rajashree Barman, Kasturi Kashyap, Torali Borah, Nilotpal Rajbangshi, Simanta Kalita and Himakshi Mazumdar.

The play revolved around the story of two young women –a journalist and her friend who had been raped by a man within the family. It depicts the stigma attached to rape, while not showing the actual incident of sexual violence. The journey of the survivor from being victimised to coming out of the shadows was depicted with intense emotion. The play also dealt with the impunity that comes within the family that let the man move on with this life while the survivor had to deal with the aftermath.

Discussion

The play was creative, with strong performances by all the performers and effective use of simple props. It dealt full-on with sexual violence without depicting it on stage, and this was done interestingly, especially the absence of the perpetrator/man. Focusing on sexual violence within the family was a bold directorial decision, it was felt. Solidarity among women was another strong point of the play.



Concerns were raised about reinforcing stereotypes, such as a victim-survivor rape being married off to a mentally ill person, or bearing an autistic child as a product of rape. Other stereotypes of a woman who is raped being shown with her hair streaming, or behaving a melodramatic distraught way could also be reviewed, and the imagery questioned.

The audience all agreed that the play was laden with emotion. But there is a need to ask: what role does emotion play? Is it a catharsis? Do you want the audience to be carried away by emotion and do we want to go beyond creating pathos?

Since the purpose of the performance is to provoke discussion, and not only to entertain, there could be some thought into how best this could be done.

4. Shillong Group

The group was represented by Lapdiang Syiem, Abigail Nongsiej, Clyde Herschel Thangkhiew and Rangchirik Ch. Marak

Lapdiang shared that theirs was a group of young artists trained in the field of media and visual studies. Each story carries with it a deep and layered struggle and the attempt was

to reach out to those who listen and perhaps challenge the others who DO NOT, into listening.



Abigail performed two poems she wrote that reflect her own journey into confronting and being confronted by society at every stage in her life as she struggles to break free of the structures that force her to be confined into a particular “type”. We forget to understand that even the smallest acts of molestation and abuse, through insults or the rules that we set, on how we should behave or dress as “decent women” in case “we provoke” are acts of

suppression that infringe on our rights to assert our own identity, the one that we have chosen for ourselves.

Her second poem is a reaction to Beth’s story (in the India Papers II, of the SVI series), a young girl in Dimapur who was raped by her father. Through this piece Abigail also addresses how social media has become a platform where stories are often sensationalized.

Rangchi’s piece is an attempt to embody a struggle without speech into the journey of being looked at as a Victim to asserting herself as a Survivor. It is a complex struggle where one goes through the many stages of confronting the memory of the act. The body, the mind and the spirit all fight to get rid of the evidence of abuse in order to overcome the shame, the guilt and the pain. How many of us go through this struggle on our own having no support from our society whatsoever?

Clyde chose a journey that looks into the issue of mental health, trauma, breakdown and suicide. Portraying a male survivor of abuse, it is a journey for him to reflect on how society views male victim-survivor of sexual violence. Being male and a subject of abuse is often met with so much shame and stigma from the society. Are we able to confront the abuse or does it sometimes take us to another level where hope is no longer in living?

Discussion

Abigail’s spoken word poetry, was a no-holds barred challenge to the audience, and her direct engagement could provoke intense discussion.

The powerful performance by Rongchi and Clyde relied on body movement and paint, not using a single word, was extremely hard-hitting.

A suggestion was to use less resource-intensive props so that T-shirts and paint are not required for every performance (Clyde and Rongchi)

4. Manipur Group

The Manipur Group was represented by Yengkhom Boycha, Thangjam Jatishor, Aheibam Chiranjit and Yengkokpam Purnima.

The Manipur group presented their work in the form of “chapters” of a story. The first, starting with a sombre candle-light procession, shines a spotlight on long-forgotten incidents like the mass rape in Kunan Poshpora in Kashmir. The tedious struggle for justice was highlighted through charts with figures and visuals.

Chapter 2, “Letter to the Doctor” was a dramatic device to bring up issues of forensic evidence and the lack of proper investigation in cases of sexual violence. This simple format provides scope to adapt the text of the letter according to each performance locale.

Forthcoming “chapters” will deal with politicisation of sexual violence, as in the recent Kathua case, and also recreate history in order to remind people of horrific incidents of the past so that these events do not fade from social memory.

Discussion

While the device of the letter was appreciated for its simplicity, there was a suggestion to cut down its length and perhaps distribute copies among the audience as a ‘takeaway’ might allow more participation.

A point raised was to be mindful of ‘othering’ the audience as bystanders. There is a need to be flexible in order to communicate and engender ‘one-ness’ on an issue like sexual violence.



A concern was raised about false distinctions between rural and urban audiences and who can understand what level of abstraction.

A suggestion for the men, to approach the question of male impunity, might strengthen the play: how do young men feel as bystanders, how do they deal with sexual violence on women, and what are the possible conversation that can be held? The performance could potentially provoke such discussions.

A question was raised about the absence of stories from Manipur, and how certain stories (like that of Luingamla and the *kashan/shawl*) which have been widely told and appreciated, could also be depicted.

Another suggestion to enhance the artistic value and make a strong point was to have the statues holding the posters with information breakdown and crumble, to symbolise cracking impunity.

Concluding session

The next phase of the project was discussed, in terms of planning performances in medical and law colleges, and coordinating with facilitators to take forward the

discussions. Each group will submit a concept note with potential performance venues, and chalk out a schedule up to December 2019.

Facilitators: Banamallika Choudhury, Papari Medhi, Mary Therese Kurkalang, Thingnam Anjulika Samom, Bidisha Mahanta and Laxmi Murthy.

Participant List:

Participants	Organization
Jatishor Thangjam	Umbilical, Manipur
Chiranjit Aheibam	Umbilical, Manipur
Boycha Yengkhom	Umbilical, Manipur
Clyde Herschel Thangkhiew	St. Anthony's
Abigail Nongsiej	St. Anthony's
Rangchirik Ch. Marak	St. Anthony's
Karry Padu	Wild Flower Productions
Yomge Chisi	Wild Flower Productions
Rajashree Barman	Jirsong, Assam
Kasturi Kashyap	Jirsong, Assam
Torali Borah	Jirsong, Assam
Nilotpal Rajbangshi	Jirsong, Assam
Simanta Kalita	Jirsong, Assam
Himakshi Mazumdar	Jirsong, Assam
Mary Kurkalang	Khublei Meghalaya
Banamallika Choudhury	NEThing
Papari Medhi	Theatre Activist
Anjulika Thingnam	Journalist
Laxmi Murthy	Zubaan
Bidisha Mahanta	Zubaan
Yengkokpam Purnima Devi	
Lapdiang A. Syiem	
Gulal Salil	TISS Student, Freelancer