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Are Women-Targeted Programs Women-Positive?

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Abstract: The authors distinguish between women-targeted and women-positive programs, citing examples of unsuccessful education programs in South Africa that were targeted at women. They question the educational and political aims of these initiatives and suggest that women-positive programs foreground gender within a broader context of transformation involving both men and women.

Introduction

Considerable resources, time and money are currently being directed towards the development of "women targeted" programs both in industrial countries and in the third world. We understand 'women targeted' programs to be initiatives that aim to educate women and girls, and which exclude men and boys. 'Women positive' programs are more holistic and inclusive. They aim to educate and support women, or are directed to women's interests, while also attending to other agendas, such as socio-economic equality, working conditions, the environment and health. Women positive programs may include men and boys.

We start this paper by raising some of the problems surrounding women-targeted programmes by investigating two recent public awareness campaigns in South Africa, as well as the "teach the mother to reach the child" approach to women's literacy education, popular in North America. We argue that these campaigns and initiatives have been at best ineffective, and at worst detrimental to the causes they were intended to advance.

The first campaign we consider is South Africa's National Condom Strategy, which aims to reduce the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS. The second is campaign is actress Charlize Theron's TV advertisements against rape and violence. Before describing the public awareness campaigns, it is important to give a short account of the broader context in which they are situated.

South Africa has the fastest growing rate of HIV transmission anywhere in the world, and most of the people infected are women (World Bank, 1997). It also has the highest incidence of reported rapes in the world. In 1997 the figure was 120 cases per 100,000 women (SAIRR, 1997). Many of these cases involved children under the age of 18, and in 60% of all rapes, the perpetrator was known to the victim. A number of explanations, biological (in the case of

STD/HIV/AIDS infection) sociological and psycho-social, have been offered for these appalling statistics (Pendry, 1998; Usdin and Ramafoko, 1999). Whichever explanations seem most plausible, it is now widely accepted that in South Africa many men are socialised to violently abuse, or tolerate abuse, of women.

The National Condom Strategy

The use of condoms (both male and female condoms) is advocated in a poster and pamphlet campaign which encourages women to become condom users. Condoms are made freely available at family planning clinics. The assumption is that women can and should control methods of contraception and STD/HIV infection, particularly in view of men's frequent refusal to use condoms in domestic, casual or commercial sexual encounters (Campbell et al, 1998; Rees, 1998). The Strategy has not been successful for a number of reasons (Rees, 1998). Women have been unable to use condoms, or negotiate condom use in the face of rejection and violence from their male partners or acquaintances.

In South Africa, STD/HIV/AIDS infection is usually understood as a private or domestic problem, rather than a public one. Women's sexual identity is derived from their traditional roles as wives, home-makers and mothers, roles characterised by fidelity and sobriety. Women who insist on condom use are assumed to be "loose" and to "deserve punishment". These unintended consequences of the National Condom Strategy show that STD/HIV/AIDS infection is a social and developmental problem located in the broader social, economic and cultural contexts in which people live. Gender dynamics play a key role in the structuring of these contexts (Campbell et al, 1998). The National Condom Strategy did not take into account the broader community and social contexts of women's lives. Making condoms available to women did not empower them to negotiate their use.

Violence Against Women TV Ad Campaign

In August 1999, Hollywood actress Charlize Theron (*Cider House Rules*) appeared in two television commercials, sponsored by the Rape Crisis Centre and the Trauma Centre for survivors of Violence and Torture, to promote public awareness of rape and domestic violence in South Africa. Theron appears in one of the advertisements in an intense close up, asking the questions: 'Have you ever raped a woman? Have you ever met a woman at a bar, had a couple of drinks with her, maybe ended up at her place. Did you have sex? Did you both enjoy it?'. In the other commercial, she remarks, "Many people ask me what South African men are like...". She recites some grim rape statistics, then continues, "So I can't really say what I think of South African men, because there are so few of them". The advertisements created a public furore, and the Advertising Standards Authority decided to ban them, claiming they discriminated against men. According to the ASA, complainants "were upset that they were considered either as rapists or as men who did not care about rape as a societal concern". Although the commercials were praised in some quarters for raising difficult questions that men normally avoid, they were also criticised as confrontational and tasteless.

Teach the mother and reach the child

Family literacy is a more ambiguous example of a women-targeted education. According to Sticht and Macdonald (1991) "teaching the mother to reach the child" is a promising policy strategy for addressing gender and development issues due to the 'multiplier effects' in the form of the "intergenerational transfer of literacy and education for children that arise from investments in women's literacy education" (p.) In this strategy, women are not involved in literacy programs education in their own right, but rather as a means to other ends, in this case, the education of children and the perceived long term economic and social benefits to society.

The problem with the programs and initiatives described above is that they ignore or bypass men (the National Condom Strategy and family literacy programs), or, in the case of the Charlize Theron commercials, they ridicule and demean men, and shut down any possibility of open and constructive dialogue.

Conclusion

Women-targeted approaches need to be re-conceptualised in light of unequal power relations that at best place responsibilities for major social issues such as HIV/AIDS, sexual violence and poverty onto women, and at worst, blame them for these phenomena. An alternative for adult education and development efforts in South Africa and elsewhere, is to create a 'gender context' where gender issues are foregrounded in ways that can meaningfully engage women and men in long-term solutions. R

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