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FEATURE

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“Without human rights education, policy remains theory”

More than a decade ago, Patrick Young founded “Theatre for a Change”, a non-governmental organization that uses participatory theatre techniques to empower women and men to effect change and demand their sexual and reproductive rights.

Here, he talks to Amnesty International about the beginnings of his original workshops, training police officers and why human rights education holds the key to improving the lives of the most marginalized.

What is *Theatre for a Change* all about?

It is about empowerment. Participatory approaches, particularly to sexual and reproductive rights, based on the principle that power structures can be changed and that participants are the best placed to do that.

Where did the idea of *Theatre for a Change* come from?

I guess the idea came from working with some fairly demanding kids in some tough situations when I was a drama teacher in the east end of London. I needed approaches that were going to make life a little bit easier and enable the kids to participate in the learning process.

After school I ran a drama club where we would devise stories based on their experiences. The last project I did while I was still a teacher was with a group of Nigerian refugees, with whom we investigated the story of Ken Saro Wiwa, who was on death row for opposing the government in Nigeria. We devised the story with the children and we performed it at the Theatre Royal in Stratford East and this man’s widow and family came to see it. That was the moment I realized I wanted to do more of that kind of work - participatory approaches to social change

How did the work evolve from a drama club to setting up an organization?

I did an MA in Theatre for Development and as part of that we had to set up a community programme. One day, while I was trying to make up my mind on where to go to apply these methodologies, I was walking through Waterloo Station in London, where a lot of homeless people used to live, and I realized there were many development issues in this country that I wanted to be a part of before I went to work on “developing” countries. I set up an organization called *Streets Alive Theatre Company* for young homeless people to articulate their situation to audiences that they would normally not encounter.

What did you do there?

It was really important that the work of advocacy on their rights was done by no one other than themselves. We believe that the participants are the experts on their lives. Nobody knows your life as well as you. The person who should be advocating for you is yourself. It’s just about having the skills and opportunities to do that and that’s what we provide.

How did you decide to go to Ghana?

I took a group of young homeless people from the UK to Ghana and we devised a story of homelessness that was, to a certain extent, cross cultural, universal. That inspired me to move to Africa, to live and work in Ghana, set up *Theatre for a Change* and use these techniques for sexual and reproductive rights. After four years, we were strong enough to take a group of the best facilitators

from Ghana and went on to set up an organisation in Malawi. We now have offices in Malawi, Ghana and the UK.

Why did you decide to focus on Sexual and Reproductive rights?

Action Aid approached us because they wanted to use this methodology on a project they were running on HIV prevention in Ghana. The technique is very suited to sexual and reproductive rights because it deals with issues of power and transfer of power. It gives the participants the opportunity of changing power dynamics in personal and social spheres.

You have run workshops for sex workers?

This has been a very natural part of our work because we wanted to provide the most marginalized sectors of society with platforms to advocate for themselves.

I remember Zion, she has been involved in *Theatre for a Change* Malawi right from the beginning. Originally she was a participant. She was struggling, like a lot of the women do, to survive and to be healthy, her health was very poor. She stayed with the project for a while and then left to go to South Africa to make some money but when she came back she said she wanted to re-join the group.

Pretty quickly she became an outstanding facilitator and social worker. I've seen her going into bars, difficult, dangerous places and approach girls and women who are themselves in very difficult situations and bring them into the work in a very impressive way. Now Zion is our child protection officer - she has been on an amazing journey.

You also worked with police officers. What was that experience like?

When we asked women sex workers who they wanted to influence, they said the police and it's working surprisingly well, in a collaborative way. I think it's a process that the police are enjoying, it makes a bit of a change from their normal work and it's acknowledged that unless there's a sharing of power both sides suffer.

We think that it's not only the oppressed that benefit from human rights being established but also the oppressors. With police, for example, they are the second highest HIV prevalence group in Malawi and there's a reason behind that. It's because they use their power to exploit women so they are, in a very direct way, experiencing the consequences of abuse, they are dying at a far higher than average rate.

Why is human rights education so important?

Because without the empowerment that happens at a grassroots level, genuine change of policies or law cannot be a reality. Without human rights education, policy will remain theory, and that's the reality most women and girls experience. In Malawi, for example, there're laws and policies that protect people, there're a lot of documents about gender and sexual rights. But all that remains completely theoretical unless you have human rights education that happens in a truly participatory way.

What would you like to see happening in the future?

We want to see empowerment of girls and women who are profoundly marginalized at the moment but who, given the right opportunities can certainly occupy much more powerful positions in their families and in their communities and in their countries as a whole.

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