

How to mobilize women?

Round Table

Presenter: Viviana Arroyos Jimenez

Facilitator: Greta Nemiroff

Secretary: Dimitri Panagos

Summary

Campaigns organized by the NGO *Viva Rio* in Rio de Janeiro are excellent examples of mobilizing women as agents of social change to reduce violence and arms proliferation. Diverse women gathered to launch the *Choose gun free! It's your weapon or me* campaign on Mother's Day in 2001. The campaign distributed white flowers and materials to help women disarm their loved ones that gave convincing arguments that a gun is much more likely to kill or injure than to protect loved ones. The *Mother, Disarm your Son* campaign involved awareness-raising concerts by popular artists.

Women also mobilized through marches and seminars in attempt to lobby politicians to penalize murders and other abuses of women. In 1998, the government gave the National Institute of Women the responsibility of writing a new law which incorporated women's suggestions. Although the President promised his support and presented this proposal to Congress, Costa Rica's Domestic Violence Law remains the only national law in Central America that does not penalize such conduct.

Nevertheless, women have continued to organize peace campaigns such as the *Visitación Padilla of Honduras* movement that succeeded in changing forced military service to voluntary. Since 2000, women have been holding monthly vigils and distributing brochures and orange ribbons symbolizing the necessity of peace between men and women. However the key to real

progress is education for peace and equality, especially of children and youth, in order to change the very roots of gender problems and violence.

Discussion

Two of the largest challenges are pervading "cultures of violence" and systemic discrimination (traditionally unequal social, political, economic practices), particularly in Southern countries, that promote violence in society in general and against women in particular. An example given is the Honduran government's zero tolerance policy which is, itself delivered violently.

Women's "double-duties" and the separation of responsibility for domestic tasks reinforce gender role stereotypes, attitudes, and behaviour. Boys learn from violent "masculine" role models that assaulting females is socially acceptable. Margaret Shaw of the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime emphasizes that the cyclical effects of such socialization signal the need to engage men and young boys in efforts to end violence against women. She gives examples of such work in Mexico and Nicaragua.

Strong forces of socialization must be overcome to effectively work with men as they may fear that agreeing with feminism threatens their masculinity. This is especially a problem with young boys for whom developing masculinity is extremely important.

Community centers in Brazil have used dance, sports, and karate to promote positive alternatives to violent behaviour and being physical in a productive, healthy way.

Women are punished more severely in South Africa because their actions are considered to be premeditated while men who kill their partners are only charged with manslaughter. A Commission in Latin America found that male attitudes and reactions to female fidelity are to blame for numerous deaths and men's lesser sentences. Murder is often legitimized as a "crime of

passion" and men are excused while women get longer sentences and very little public support or sympathy. Although Latin American courts are becoming more likely to believe women in cases of domestic violence, police forces often do not apply the full weight of the law to male offenders. In Canada, the situation is more positive and battered wives receive shorter sentences.

The challenge of corporate-minded women adopting competitive "male" values and working against other women once in positions of power is raised.

The public in El Salvador was more responsive to an increase in children's deaths than women's deaths - linking women's issues to children's deaths, has encouraged more action and change. Media and society have mobilized more in reaction to innocent people being hurt or killed by stray bullets - this problem could also be used to draw greater attention to women's safety. Municipal lobbying by mothers was more likely to get respect than that of feminists.

The issue of women not leaving abusive partners is raised - why do some women seem to prefer being abused to being alone? Women need to be empowered by giving them employment training that will allow them to become autonomous and no longer financially dependent on her abusive partner, which is often what keeps her with him. Such training initiatives also provide a place for women to discuss gender issues while they work together.

Women's solidarity is threatened by the fact that some young women think that equality has been achieved and the battle is over. It is important to engage these young women in discussion of their particular safety interests and concerns.

Girls can be encouraged to share their experiences and ideas by telling stories of other girls' lives and then involving new girls by asking them how the story relates to their own lives. For example, asking, "What would you do if this happened to your friend?" "How would you help her?" Similarly, "it can't happen to me" attitudes of young girls can be combated by using anecdotes that they can relate to.

Conclusions

- Cultures of violence are perpetuated by "spheres of social, political, and economic apathy" to women's plight in these realms.
- Cycles of violence and injustice are perpetuated in families by violent "masculine" role models.
- Awareness building needs to be done to redefine "love" and the acceptable dynamics of relations between men and women. This is especially important in cultures where romantic jealousy often leads to violence and murders that are excused as "crimes of passion". Boys need to be taught that jealousy is not a sign of affection and that victims are not to be blamed.
- Education must begin early - training in prisons to reverse machismo developed in childhood and adolescence is too late.
- We need to consider possible replacements for violence and its benefits to men - ex., peer respect, material goods...

Recommendations

- We must work with men and young boys to counter-socialize traditional "masculine" roles that perpetuate family cycles and social cultures of violence.
- Public education needs to involve older men who have been through the "system" and whose violent socialization and actions have been reversed. These reformed non-violent men should serve as new masculine role models/trainers for young boys.

- Use sports and recreation to promote physical alternatives to violence and positive, productive ways to release emotion.
- Teachers and community educators need gender-sensitivity training and schools must encourage the study of peace, non-violence, and gender issues.
- Women need to be empowered by giving them employment or income-generation training that will allow them to become financially independent from abusive partners.
- Mobilization must start at the local level. Different social issues should be linked together so as to attract more attention and encourage greater public support and response - ex., linking women's issues with larger general public health and safety issues.