

Young people work to promote gender equality in Brazil



Christine Ricardo & Vanessa Fonseca

A recording session for the soap opera

Gender is central to understanding vulnerabilities of young people, particularly in terms of sexuality and health in Brazil. Rigid ideas and expectations of how men and women should behave and relate to each other underlie rates of HIV and sexually transmitted infections transmission, contraceptive use patterns, physical violence (against women and between men) and a variety of other health and social issues.

Entre Nós (“Between Us”) is an innovative multi-media campaign to engage Brazilian youth in critical reflections on rigid ideas about gender and how they influence their lives and relationships. The campaign was developed and implemented by Promundo, a Brazilian NGO based in Rio de Janeiro, and a group of young women and men peer educators known as JPEG (the acronym in Portuguese for Youth for Gender-Equity).

Entre Nós’ flagship is a radio-based soap opera about a young couple, Beto and Jessica, and their friends. The storyline addresses first sexual experiences, condom use, unplanned pregnancy and adolescent parenthood through the lenses of women’s empowerment and gender equity. The choice of soap opera for the campaign was strategic – soap operas are a big part of popular culture in Brazil and have a wide appeal across different social groups.

The radio provided a low-cost alternative medium, both for production and dissemination (as opposed to television, or street theatre, for example). The soap opera

is played on local radio stations and in diverse settings where young people hang out – schools, community centres, beauty salons, cyber cafes, snack bars, mobile sound trucks and at large community events.

Besides promoting questioning of gender norms, peer educators became local resources for the community on sexual and reproductive health, violence against women and other campaign issues

Lately, more work has been done in school settings and three to four different schools will be involved in implementing the campaign over the next two years. Advocacy and training based on the campaign and its themes will also be provided for teachers in 10 to 20 other schools.

Following the airing of episodes, peer educators facilitate discussion groups in

which youth talk about the storyline and its link to their lives and relationships. The soap opera is also accompanied by a set of comic books and a soundtrack with songs set to popular music styles, from samba to rap, and lyrics inspired by the campaign themes.

In four local communities where the campaign has been implemented, approximately 1,600 youth have participated in organised discussion groups and about 4,500 copies of each of the three issues of the comic books have been distributed. About 9,000 youth and adults have heard the soap opera through public airings (radio and mobile sound trucks). The project expects to reach 5,000 to 7,000 students with the *Entre Nós* campaign through its school-based efforts.

Entre Nós campaign is part of Promundo’s efforts to promote gender equity and health among the youth. The efforts have been inspired by Programmes H and M (H for *hombres* and *homens* and M for *mujeres* and *mulheres* - the Spanish and Portuguese words for men and women) – complementary interventions, which use education workshops and other community outreach strategies to engage the youth in critical reflections on gender and help them build the skills necessary to act in more empowered and equitable ways.

Originally developed in Latin America in collaboration with national and international partners¹ Programmes H and M have since been adapted for use in the Balkans, India and Tanzania, and are an integral part of current school-based efforts. Estudio Metara, Nike Foundation, Summit Foundation and SSL International (Durex) support the campaign.

In 2007, the campaign was launched in three low-income communities in Rio de Janeiro in collaboration with the same youth who had participated in its development. Some 9,000 youth, as well as parents, teachers and other community members, were reached with messages about gender equity and health.

Samuel Marques Cavalcante from Santa Marta, a peer educator said: "Many people... asked: 'Why can a man do this and I can't?' 'Why do women get beaten so much?' 'Why are men so much more violent than women?' 'Why don't men take care of the house?' I think the (campaign)

was able to make people think...put in their heads 'look, this is our reality but does it have to keep being this way? ...men hitting women, does it have to keep being this way?' We (were able) to put these (questions) forward for people...we can see that people are starting to think about the issues..."

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Besides promoting questioning of gender norms, peer educators became local resources for the community on sexual and reproductive health, violence against women and other campaign issues.

Veronica Moura said: "A woman today doesn't have to stay at home taking care of the kids. She can study, have her own career... I see women as independent.

Today, I fight against violence...even in my own family there is a lot of violence – men, husbands hitting their wives, and I work on this with them. Thank God, I have seen results...within my own family. Some (things have changed), not (everything), but for me that is a positive thing."

Nearly all peer educators reported being stopped often in the streets of their communities by young people, parents and community leaders who wanted copies of the comic books and/or more information on the campaign. "Even today in the community, after we have done all this work...if someone who attended our previous workshop or has seen me distributing materials recognises me, the person comes up to me to talk...to ask advice...This does not happen just with me but also with others who worked with the group, so that is really cool," says Andreza Silveira from Maré.

An innovative aspect of the campaign is that it brought together young women and men

Entre nós – Teasing...

These posters are called 'teasers' and are used to launch the campaign in a particular setting.



The translation of the poster with the young man is: "My girlfriend showed me a new way. Now I only want it this way Between Us."

The poster with the young woman says: "My boyfriend does it this way with me. Now I only want it this way Between Us."

Lastly, the poster with the couple states: "Between Us we only do it this way. Have you ever thought about doing it (this way too)?"



The aim of these 'teasers' is to generate interest and curiosity in the 'it' to which the young man and young woman are referring. Subsequent posters explain the 'it' as love, respect and equality.

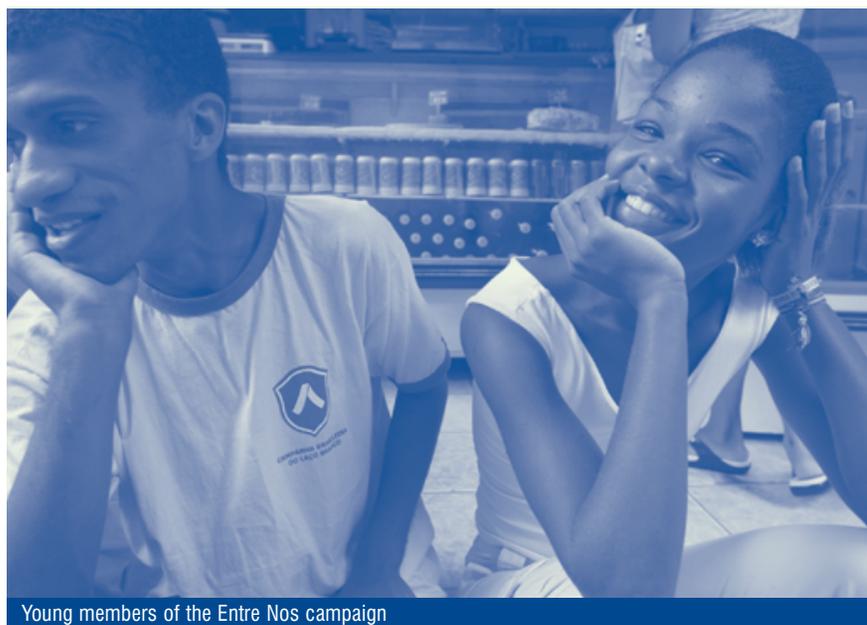
to advocate for women’s empowerment and gender equity. While there are numerous projects involving young women and young men, rarely do they engage these young people in reflections, dialogue and action on specific issues of women’s empowerment and gender equity. Moreover, as programmes that engage young and adult men in the promotion of gender equity increase, very few of them involve structured dialogue or collaboration with girls and women or specifically work with men to be advocates for women’s empowerment and gender equity.

While many young men peer educators, and even some young women, initially had doubts about if and how young men could take on this role, the consensus was that the “mixed” group was fundamental in ensuring the campaign was accepted among youth in general and that its content was relevant and engaging to both women and men.

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The design and implementation of the campaign also provided a valuable chance for peer educators to develop skills and reputations as youth leaders and social activists. Many have also been involved in other social issues. For example, one of the original peer educators, Gilmar Santos da Cunha, co-founded and currently runs a community-based organisation to promote respect for sexual diversity and GLBT rights. Gilmar says: “JPEG had an important impact in my development...it was the beginning of who I am today. Before (participating in JPEG) I was not very informed on the issues which I work on now (sexuality, rights, diversity). My interest in these issues began then...the democratic nature of the group and the collective construction (of the campaign) inspired me, allowed me to grow and showed me the importance of collaboration.”

The project addresses the gender-based expectations and power dynamics in



Young members of the Entre Nos campaign

intimate relationships that often underlie young women and men’s vulnerability to HIV. The campaign – as well as the Programmes H and M curricula – engage the youth in reflections about the importance of communication and negotiation in intimate relationships. The workshops help them to build the necessary skills to talk to partners about prevention, use prevention methods and seek services and information to protect their health. Both curricula have specific activities on HIV prevention, as well as living with HIV and addressing stigma and discrimination. An impact evaluation of Programme H in Rio de Janeiro found an increase in self-reported condom use among young men who attended workshops, as well as a decrease in reported STI symptoms.

In 2008, the campaign started collaborating with the Education Secretariats and schools in the states of Rio de Janeiro and Bahia in Brazil to adapt and integrate *Entre Nós* and Programmes H and M into the public education sector.

The two-year process will provide the opportunity to reach thousands of youth on a sustained basis with messages about more equitable and more empowered ways of living together. It will also offer valuable lessons learned and recommendations to inform subsequent scale-up efforts of

gender-transformative programming for youth in Brazil and other settings. ■

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1. Programme H was originally developed by four Latin American non-governmental organisations that had significant experience in working with young men: Promundo (coordinator of the initiative), ECOS (in São Paulo, Brazil), Instituto PAPAÍ (Recife, Brazil) and Salud y Género (Mexico) in collaboration with International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, Western Hemisphere Region) and the Pan American Health Organisation. Subsequently, World Education joined for the development of Programme M.