

Research Article

Piloting an Interactive Theater Program to Promote Intimate Partner Violence Awareness among Refugees Resettled In the United States

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This pilot project used an interactive theater approach to teach effective bystander interventions to refugees resettled in the United States. These interventions are utilized to prevent intimate partner violence (IPV) in refugee communities.

Methods: This project consists of the following procedures: 1) development of a script; 2) first round of the performance enacting the play based on the original script, in which bystanders were not helpful for the victim of IPV; 3) second round of the performance where the audience alters the story, making bystanders more helpful and considerate of the victim; 4) focus group formation to receive feedback from the audience; and 5) debriefing amongst the research team. Throughout the project, participants expressed a keen interest in IPV prevention and were knowledgeable on the issue.

Results: Overall, the focus group participants provided helpful suggestions such as introducing the audience to IPV

before the commencement of the play by showing statistics and integrating outside, existing community resources for IPV victims. Conclusively, the IPV theater program was shown to be a learning experience, not only for the audience but for the research team as well. Members of the research team learned effective bystander interventions they could use in their lives while gaining further insight into the community's thoughts on IPV prevention.

Conclusion: This project shows how theater approaches are a useful way to provide IPV awareness and prevention for the refugee communities. Through theater programs, individuals with refugee background can realize the role of communication and difficulty in leaving the situation. The project also suggests that the effect theater programs have on participants benefits their wider community.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence; Interactive theater; Refugees; Resettlement; USA

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) specifically refers to physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse that inflicts harm upon a person in an intimate partnership. This pilot project uses an interactive theater approach on bystander intervention education to prevent IPV among refugees resettled in the United States (US). Bystanders are those who witness violence and abusive behaviors between partners, while intervention is the action taken to stop violent behavior [1]. Since IPV is a pressing issue, bystanders play an important role in the ongoing nature of this violence and its prevention [2]. In the US, 68% of all acts of IPV occur in public settings [3] where bystanders can diffuse the violent situation, aid victims, and confront perpetrators [4].

On college campuses, several victims of IPV reported having spoken to family or friends about the violent actions that transpired [2]. However, these bystanders do not know where to take this information, so the victims feel an increase of trauma after confiding in someone and not receiving the adequate help they deserve [2]. This lack of action may be from the scarcity of knowledge and education of IPV circulating on college campuses. One study found that bystander intervention rates increase after students have seen successful bystander interventions being performed [2]. This is notable because refugees tend to "suffer in silence" instead of reporting the

abuse to authorities as a coping mechanism [5]. When victims and bystanders are aware of IPV resources available to them and how to handle these situations, they are more likely to seek out help [2].

Given increased rates of IPV in refugee communities, this project studies the effect of interactive theater specifically in refugee communities. This is the reason this project's interactive theater approach specifically targets the refugee community. The probability of IPV occurring drastically increases when women are removed from their families, communities, and support systems, putting refugee women at higher risk than non-immigrants [6]. Refugee women often report an increase in violence towards them from a spouse because of their immigrant status. Many refugee men come to the United States unemployed and, subsequently, feel disempowered. To make up for this, some use violence to affirm their power status over their wives [5]. These cases often go unreported from the fear of being deported, which leads to the continuation of IPV [7]. Furthermore, husbands of refugee women may also threaten to destroy essential documents pertaining to their wives pending immigration status, dissuading them from seeking help for the IPV [8]. In addition, women who are refugees have a much higher risk of IPV leading to homicide [9].

Education and increasing awareness are important for refugee victims of IPV to access services that meet their needs

[10]. A South Asian community in Michigan used an IPV forum theater program and found it significantly increased IPV awareness in this community [11]. Theater allows information to be received by the viewer's interactively, allowing audience members to speak freely about their experiences and ideas surrounding IPV bystander interventions [12]. Additionally, forum theater is an intervention program that is preventative in nature, therefore, decreasing the occurrence of IPV [13]. The purpose of this research project was to pilot a theater approach to develop IPV prevention programs in refugee communities in the US.

Methods

A team of researchers made up of undergraduate and graduate students developed a script dealing with IPV in a marriage. These research members have backgrounds in sociology and humanities. Several script drafts were created before settling on four female characters, all of whom were friends, discussing one friend's experiences at a coffee shop. The age demographic of the target audience ranged from the early twenties to forties, so the scriptwriters chose to make the couple-experiencing IPV married, to appeal to this target audience. Additionally, four female college student characters in the script were all college students. For the corresponding play, the audience was composed of two refugee college students at the University of Utah. Both participants were females- one from the Middle East and one from Latin America. As for the actors, one student portrayed a victim of IPV while the others played bystanders who hear the victims' concerns about her relationship with her husband.

Before the commencement of the play, the two participants were given a survey to determine their previous knowledge of, and current attitudes towards, IPV. This survey included questions regarding whether or not the participants would intervene if they saw an act of IPV taking place, if they believe there are enough resources for victims of IPV to reach out to, and whether they think bystander interventions prevent further acts of IPV from occurring. The participants responded to the survey question using a Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Afterward, the data from the survey were compared to a post-performance survey, given after the completion of the second-round play.

In the first performance, the play showed non-beneficial bystander roles which support the victim's husband's acts of IPV. Since IPV is a sensitive topic, depictions of violence were not presented during any part of the play. Instead, characters made references to the bruises on the IPV victim and other emotional trauma inflicted. In the play, the victim's husband would not allow her to go out with friends unless he was present and was physically violent at home. The characters blamed the IPV victim for her abusive husband's actions and did not give her adequate sources to seek help. In the second-round performance, the two audience members engaged in the play and provided feedback to change the bystanders' roles. They suggested the three friends provide the victim with resources where she could seek help. Additionally, they altered the way the friends spoke to the victim, creating a more supportive environment than in the first performance.

After the conclusion of both rounds, a focus group was formed with the two female participants. The purpose of the focus group was to gain feedback on the effectiveness of the theater approach and how it may be changed in the future to enhance the experience. Questions from the focus group are as follows:

- 1) What were the aspects of the theater approach that you enjoyed?
- 2) How can community theater effectively educate students on IPV in the refugee community?
- 3) Are there any specific improvements you would like to see implemented if another bystander intervention theater program were to take place,
- 4) What are some negative ramifications that may arise due to bystander intervention for victims of IPV who have a refugee background?
- 5) If your friend tells you that she or he is being abused by her of his intimate partner what would you do,
- 6) What educational opportunities or resources that, besides a theater program do you want to support victims of IPV in the refugee community,
- 7) Is there anything else that either of you would like to add?

The discussion of these questions lasted 15 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants. Subsequently, a member of the research team transcribed the recording and analyzed the results. Debriefing with the research team followed the session where they discussed ways to improve the play for future audiences based on the feedback from participants. The participants were compensated with a \$20 gift card at the end of the session.

Results

At the beginning of the session, the two participants expressed strong interest in IPV prevention and were knowledgeable on the issue. The participant from Latin America (Participant One) described how she works at the Women's Resource Center at the University of Utah and is an active advocate for women's rights. However, future participants of the forum theater may not have previous knowledge of IPV prevention and bystander behaviors. Regarding this, Participant One suggested background information be given to participants before the start of the play. Participant One said, "I think it'd be good to give even the audience like maybe an intro before to what's going on. . ." This information could include statistics of IPV in the refugee community and resources on campus victims and bystanders could reach out to. Additionally, the participant from the Middle East (Participant Two) said she did not understand how the play was going to go or how to interact at first. From this, a researcher suggested giving future audiences a clearer idea of what forum theater is and gives examples of how they can interact with the play.

During the second round of the play, the audience altered the story making the friends more helpful bystanders. For example, one participant said, "I would say 'How long is it being going?' (with regards the bruise on the victim). She (the victim) needs help. She needs to stay away. If it is getting physical, she

should get out from marriage.” Another example is, “He (the victim’s husband) is very controlling. You should not have such experience. She has her own life. [It’s a] double standard if [he] say[s] he loves you. If he loves you, he should be able to let her go out with her friends.” Based on the audience’s suggestions, the actors then changed the story.

Overall, the focus group participants had positive feedback. Participant One said, “For visual learners it’s great. It helps them actually see the situation and how like, it is very important. I feel like it shows that communication really is really key and stuff.” Both participants said they liked the number of actors that were put in the play. Participant One said, “I liked how many people there were. Like I like how there was not just one friend. ‘Cause that was like even more ideas.” Having more actors written in the script also allows for a bigger audience. That way more of them can interact and take the place of the actors than if there were fewer, receiving more input and opinions on what make an effective bystander intervention. The participants also enjoyed the interactive aspect of the forum theater program. Participant Two said, “Yeah, it’s more interactive with the actors (referring to them taking the place of the actors).” Participant One commented, “the changes, how you guys let us kind of adjust and guide that. Yeah, yeah, I like that a lot.” Furthermore, Participant One said, “Also what you say is important. ‘Cause I feel like then people will know like, oh like, it’s important for these friends to know exactly what to say at this moment and also for like, her to know about her relationship that way.” This suggests the interactions in forum theater can be brought to real-world situations and aid the participants in knowing what to say, and what actions to take, if they see acts of IPV going on.

While the audience was overall positive, they had some suggestions for improvement. As for IPV interventions specifically for individuals with a refugee background, the audience suggested integrating a theater IPV prevention program with existing community resources for refugees. Participant One also suggested the Women’s Resource Center and the Refugee Center on the University of Utah Campus can team up with the forum theater group and give pamphlets with resources victims of IPV can reach out to. There was also insightful discussion on the sensitive nature of IPV and ways to address this issue without upsetting IPV victims. Participant One addressed how to present IPV issues to a victim, “It’s a sensitive topic. Yeah, very private. So it has to be something that is like, this is not okay. Yeah and if, like, if you’re going through this like, please know that there is support and there is help and there’s people. Yes. Because there can be like a woman in a room with you that is going through that. Going through this and they can be a sensitive topic to her to even discuss... it needs to be in a like, healthy manner (regarding the way to bring up the topic of IPV) to the point where it’s like, she’s not like overwhelmed. Yeah. or she’s like -oh my gosh. It needs to be like “-hey this is going on it’s not okay, but like here’s how we can help you, and you really should do this. So, it needs to be kind of persuasive, but also like educational.” These notes from the participants made the research team aware that, although the forum theater project is for educating people on bystander interventions, audience members may be going through situations of IPV, or may have had in the past. The researchers took this into account by not depicting actual violent scenes, but more can be done in future

forum theater plays to reduce an upsetting environment and make it more positive.

Furthermore, the participants had an interesting debate regarding the negative ramifications of IPV bystander interventions in the refugee community. Participant One said, “I think one thing could be culture. Because there are some cultures like, I know my own is very like ‘machista.’ And like a lot of people can talk about that as like, “Oh the man, well the man has to provide everything to the house, the man has to do this, the man is the owner ... it’s stuff like that or like that can happen where it needs to be a way where it’s still respected.” ‘Machista’ is a Spanish word referring to male chauvinism and men being the financial and safety providers in their households [9]. Participant One eluded that there are norms in every culture which need to be respected when having conversations of IPV, and what one culture sees as IPV may not be the same in another culture. However, Participant Two did not agree with this statement, “So, you think culture is, it’s kind of related to physical violence is what you’re saying? That some cultures allow it?” Participant one clarified her thoughts, “I’m saying that some of the things, the little things (referring to differences in culture), can have an effect on the way that some men think that they can treat women.” This was an interesting conversation and the research team learned that the forum theater script should be tailored to the audience, and the same script should not be used for the entire refugee community.

The final discussion in the focus group was what the participants would do if their friend tells them she or he is being abused by her of his intimate partner. Participant Two thought, “I would just do what we just did (referring to the bystander interventions performed during the forum theater session). Like talk them into getting help, and, um... just keeping in touch with them all the time to see, trying to convince them that this is not okay if they think it’s okay. <Mm-Hmm.> And if they think that it’s not okay, then I will help them the best way I can, and I’ll make it my mission to, you know, um, get them out of their marriage, or, fix it, if it is fixable.” Participant One answered, “definitely looking for resources and like, if it comes down to like a really bad, ‘cause like, there’s some women that like, it’s like, even if she is showing, like showing on their like skin or their face like (referring to bruises on a victim or other visible marks), then I’d think like I’d be the type of friend to be like “-hey like, even if you don’t talk to me ever again like I’m going to the police because it’s for your own well-being.” This discussion shows the participants benefitted from the forum theater program and the problem-solving in the second-round performance aided in future decision making. It prepared them for on the spot thinking when they are placed in similar scenarios. Regarding this, Participant Two confirmed, “...It’s a great idea what you guys are doing, ‘cause it just, it gives you, um, I guess it gives you a sense of what other people are thinking and, um, and then... based on their response you can, um, like implement lines and, and to kind of educate them to know their level of understanding in those things...”

Discussion

Overall, the IPV forum theater program appears to be a learning experience not only for the audience but also for

the research team. The two participants discovered effective bystander interventions they may use when they see acts of IPV occurring. Additionally, the interactive play helps them with on the spot thinking and problem-solving if they are ever bystanders to IPV scenarios. Further, it will be advantageous if audience members in session one become actors in the following sessions. This way, they will get more experience seeing other people's ideas on successful interventions. The subsequent focus group also allowed for collaborative discussion and the participants gained knowledge from the other person's responses.

As for the research team, the preparation process, especially writing a script, was informative. It allowed them to explore the best way to present a sensitive topic without jarring the audience. From the participant's interaction, the research team learned bystander interactions that they can implement when they see acts of IPV occurring. As for the focus group, the researchers gained insight into how the forum theater program should be improved for future audiences. Additionally, the forum theater play allowed them to connect with refugees in the community and have a greater understanding of their cultures and the best way to present issues without undermining culture.

Although this pilot project was successful, some limitations must be considered for forthcoming performances. First, this pilot project had an all-female case and audience meaning there was no male input. It is essential to have male actors and males in the audience to remedy this. One way to accomplish this is to collaborate with other community outreach programs to recruit actors and participants. This way, there will be a larger selection of actors and participants, so more perspectives are heard and shown. Additionally, this pilot project portrayed a female victim of IPV. Bystanders are less likely to intervene when IPV is committed against men and a female is the perpetrator. Given there is a double standard on this issue, it is crucial to show the audience that men can be victims of IPV too, and they need to be aware of this to perform effective bystander interventions. This entails the development of a new script where the IPV victim is a male.

Second, while the participants of this pilot project were college students and, therefore, spoke English, language may be a barrier when implementing in refugee communities. Since the actors only spoke English and the play was written in English, this dramatically reduces the number of refugees that can be reached. For future forum theater performances, the scripts may be translated to the audience member's native language for better understanding of the play. Also, the research team can recruit refugee actors who can perform the play in their language to benefit the audience.

Conclusion

As suggested by the participants, providing background information about IPV would be beneficial for potential audience members. This knowledge will provide participants with necessary contextual information such as statistics of IPV prevalence in the refugee community and what IPV is and how it presents itself. Furthermore, the research team can provide articles before the performance on what forum theater is so they have a good understanding of how to interact when the second-round starts. At the end of the second-round performance, it is

useful to hand out flyers of different resources on campus or in the community where refugees can go to see out help. Whether it is a friend who is going through IPV or themselves, this information is valuable for future reference.

Third, it would be excellent to get an audience having less background knowledge about IPV to see if the theater program is an effective teaching model. It was shown to educate the audience on bystander interventions but did not show how much the participants learned on IPV. The pilot project participants were knowledgeable about IPV and had previously studied this topic. So, there was no way to test how effective the theater program was at further educating the audience on IPV. On the whole, a theater approach may be an efficient way to provide IPV awareness and prevention for the refugee communities in the US.

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