

# Between Us:

OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS  
OF EDUCATION ACTIVITIES TO  
PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY IN  
SCHOOLS OF RIO DE JANEIRO AND  
SALVADOR, BRAZIL

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# Between Us: Opportunities and Limitations of Education Activities to Promote Gender Equality in Schools of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, Brazil

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This paper presents a debate on the opportunities and limitations of implementing projects aimed to promote gender equality in schools, based on the experience of adopting educational tools created for this purpose: Program H (for men, or 'homens' in Portuguese, and 'hombres,' in Spanish) and Program M (for women, or 'mulheres' in Portuguese, and 'mujeres,' in Spanish), for Promundo and partner organizations.

## Programs H and M

Programs H (for Men) and M (for Women) join several educational and entertaining tools that seek to stimulate thinking and engage youth in activities to promote gender equality and health. Among these tools, we highlight educational activities of three animated films and a radio soap opera from a project called “Between Us.” “Between Us” tells the story of two young people who seek to resolve their conflicts through dialogue.

The educational activities that make up both programs seek to create a safe and reliable space for questioning social conventions in relation to rigid gender roles. They include dramas, animated films, games and discussion activities that seek to stimulate individual and collective reflection on how men and women are socialized, the positive and negative aspects of socialization, and the possible benefits of changing certain behaviors. The activities cover issues such as sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence and HIV prevention.

Program H contains specific actions which have been evaluated to work with men. These actions consider men's needs and interests for the promotion of gender equality. The intervention was originally developed by four non-governmental organizations in Latin America which had significant experience in working with young men. Program H has been endorsed by Brazilian, Mexican, and Indian governments, and was mentioned in the 2007 World Development Report (World Bank), by UNICEF (2007), and by UNFPA (2005) in the State of World Population report as an effective, innovative, and adaptable intervention to involve young and adult men in promoting equality between men and women. It is currently being implemented in over 20 countries in South America, Asia, and Africa. This year, 2010, Programs H and M won the Third Annual Best Practices Award for incorporating Gender Equality perspectives in Adolescent and Youth Health of the Pan American Health Organization.

The experience of working with young men led to an initiative to promote gender equality from the perspective of young women: Program M. The Program M educational curriculum was tested in Brazil, Jamaica, Mexico and Nicaragua, and discusses various issues related to the health of young women including sexual identity, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, motherhood, education, work and community participation.

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Another component of both programs consists of campaigns created by youth themselves to reinforce messages about gender equality and health through drama, music, radio, and print media. For the most recent campaign, a group of thirty youth from three communities of Rio de Janeiro gathered to create a strategy that sought to promote young women's sexual and reproductive health and autonomy. The campaign included messages targeted toward both women and men. The main campaign initiative was the production and dissemination of a radio drama, "Between Us." The drama tells the story of two young people, Bob and Jessica, as they begin to discover the consequences of gender socialization in their work and family lives. The plot, inspired by the educational videos of Programs H and M, was divided into themes for three seasons: first sexual experience to pregnancy, motherhood and professional life, and achieving autonomy.

Aside from airing on community radio, the radio soap opera was broadcast in places where youth frequented, such as high schools, beauty parlors, and internet cafés. Locations were selected through a mapping exercise on the habits of these youth. To promote publicity, banners, flyers, megaphone announcements from cars, comics, and a soundtrack with four songs were produced especially for the radio dramas.

## Taking Program H and M to Schools

The experience with youth and their own initiative in carrying out many of these activities in schools led Promundo to develop a project to adapt Program H and M strategies to the school environment.

Schools, though not the only institutions responsible for shaping youth, represent important spaces for youth to reflect on values and knowledge. As a result, schools are also channels for youth to reflect on topics related to sexuality and sexual and reproductive health. In 1995, the National Curriculum Guidelines (PCN, by their Portuguese acronym) were developed, which sought to ensure that schools address sexuality and sexual and reproductive health as cross-cutting themes. Teachers were not used to discussing these issues in their academic training, and as a result, many raised questions and concerns.

Moreover, many professionals who worked in the day-to-day life of schools were taught to welcome and support pregnant young women so that these women could continue their education. Professionals were also taught to encourage young men to be involved in caring for their babies.

In general, the implementation of Programs H and M in schools sought to: (1) adapt and test participatory methodologies for group reflection to promote gender equality in schools, thus contributing to the proposed public policies on promoting gender equality in schools; (2) reflect with education professionals on how to adapt and use participatory methodologies in groups and campaigns to promote gender equality in schools; and (3) promote reflection and transform attitudes about gender issues among students.

## Contextualizing the work on Gender in Schools: Progress and Possibilities

The 1988 Brazilian Constitution offered the basis for policies that would emphasize public education, along with promoting rights regardless of race, sex, color, age, and other forms of discrimination. The PCNs, prepared between 1995 and 1997, however, represent one of the most important advances to date for education policies to incorporate gender equality. The PCNs offered an innovative way to introduce children and youth to the concepts of identity formation and structures of social relationships (Unbehau and Vianna, 2006).

The Special Secretariat of Policies for Women (SPM) has put forth innovative proposals for education policies, in addition to supporting several strategies to ensure students complete school, and are able to reflect on and transform attitudes about traditional gender patterns. The creation of this office in 2003 and launch of the National Plan of Policies for Women in 2004, expand the possibilities for major changes, including the prospect of incorporating gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation in formal education processes. We therefore created Gender and Diversity in School, a guide for public school teachers on how to deconstruct prejudices and behaviors in relation to gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

In addition, the Brazil without Homophobia Program, launched in 2004, aims to promote LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Transgender) citizenship and combat homophobia. It focuses on deconstructing prejudice, discrimination, and violence against the LGBT population.

The School Health and Prevention Project (SPE) has been supporting education professionals to work on health promotion projects in schools. The projects cover gender and sexuality issues, though much is aimed toward disease prevention, including AIDS and STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).

All of these projects have opened up spaces for carrying out initiatives on sexuality, gender, and sexual and reproductive health in schools, both by non-governmental organizations, and by education professionals who attend training courses on these subjects. The formulation of policies which promote respect for diversity and equal rights provide fertile ground for effective changes, but there is still long way to go. In addition, these projects have led to important reflection on working on these subjects in schools.

### **Lessons learned on the implementation of activities to promote gender equality in schools: some tips for beginning work**

The National Curriculum Guidelines propose to integrate gender equality and related topics as cross-cutting themes, through activities across all disciplines. The choice of topics has depended on schools' perceived urgency of discussing certain issues such as STD and AIDS prevention, teen pregnancy, violence among youth, and the environment. It has only been through raising the topic of "sexual orientation" (understood as education about sexuality) that the topic of "gender" has gained relevance (Unbehaum and Vianna, 2006). "Sexual orientation" should cover issues of the human body, gender relations, and disease prevention. Considering the range of issues at hand, what often happens is that a gender perspective is seen and taught as an area restricted to health, and not as matter of ensuring rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. It is important to ensure issues related to sexuality are not restricted to the "dangers" of "diseases" or "unwanted pregnancies."

Just as it is important to provide information about sexual and reproductive healthcare such as condom use, contraceptive methods, or self-examinations, it is also important to promote choices and offer ways of negotiating healthy sexual relationships between partners. In addition to being knowledgeable about condom use, it is important for youth and adult men and women to feel they can take positions on how to construct their sexual and reproductive lives. Moreover, dealing with disease prevention, condoms, and contraceptive methods is important because all individuals have the right to experience fulfilling and healthy sexual lives.

It is also important to consider how norms in our culture influence the way men and women behave differently in relation to decision-making power and access to resources and social spaces. While acknowledging women's achievements and important advances in recent decades, we can still say that Brazil is a country with significant gender disparities. These disparities can be seen through labor market data, in which women earn 70% of what men earn according to IBGE, and through data on gender violence. For instance, studies show that one in three women have suffered some type of violence committed by their partner.

Regarding sexuality, norms and beliefs discourage many women to take the initiative when it comes to condom use, or to take over and decide freely about their sex lives. Men are not encouraged to talk with their partners or to care for their own sexual and reproductive health. From a young age, men learn that these are "women's issues." The ways men and women are socialized grants more power to men in both public and private spheres. Men remain the ones who make primary decisions about family, sexuality, and the world of work. On the other hand, many programs to promote sexual and reproductive health only target women, including the distribution of contraceptive methods. Thus, dealing with sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, without considering power differences related to gender norms, is insufficient and in fact does not guarantee the sexual and reproductive health rights of individuals.



The PCN are a reference for education on sexuality and do not impose mandatory guidelines, which has been a positive aspect. Instead, they propose content to guide and structure curricula used throughout the country's education system. The PCNs allow schools to revise and contextualize their own curricula. Despite the merits of the PCNs, we can observe little about the actual implementation of the PCNs in practice in schools.

Another finding we have gathered by observing day-to-day life in schools is that actions are often initiated by individual teachers or outside organizations, rather than in a consistent manner, or embedded in the practices and relationships within schools as institutions. That is, sexuality is discussed, but in day-to-day interactions within schools, one notices taboos, homophobic discourses, a lack of respect for the student in terms of his or her uniqueness and desires, and suppression of displays of affection, among other practices. Therefore, in order for schools to adopt gender and sexuality as cross-cutting themes, as well as to adopt new practices in their day-to-day interactions, teaching staff will need to be involved in planning to ensure that the ways in which these themes are adopted make sense for everyone.

Recent evaluation of training for continuing education underscores the importance of education professionals to reflect on gender issues. However, these professionals must be able to transfer gender issues into practice in schools, and have access to tools they can use in the classroom (Pereira and Rohden, 2007). Promundo has thus begun to build on its programming based on feedback from professionals who have worked in schools, and by observing school meetings.

## Meetings in Schools

We took different paths to initiating the programs in schools. Several elements were already in place, including Program H and M activities and materials with their accompanying campaigns, as well as interest in implementing the programs in schools. The Department of Education and other partner organizations introduced us to teachers and principals who were already involved in initiatives to prevent HIV/AIDS, such as in the School Health and Prevention Project. These partners also introduced us to professionals who expressed a need to address issues of sexuality, including sexual diversity and teen pregnancy in schools.

We used other pathways to enter schools, building off of our experiences throughout the three years of this work. We made alliances to introduce the theme of gender in existing projects in schools and to incorporate it into the Group of State Managers' School Health and Prevention Project. In this project, we seek to foster discussions with education managers throughout municipalities in Rio de Janeiro state, about how rigid gender roles make it difficult to make choices and access methods to promote sexual and reproductive health. The project is based on the perspective that everyone is entitled to experience pleasure, that is, without imposing their will on others.

Often, the demand for education on sexuality in schools comes from education professionals' idea of controlling the "unbridled sexuality" of teenagers. Our work, together with professionals who work in schools, has aimed to develop initiatives to address sexuality in a way that promotes and ensures sexual and reproductive rights. That is, the work aims to ensure that everyone can make choices about who they love, with whom and how they engage in sexual relationships, and when to have children. It also aims to promote access to resources that facilitate these choices, such as contraceptive methods and the questioning of hierarchical relationships in which the desires of one person are subjugated to the desires of the other. In order for choices to be made in an equitable manner, it is necessary to have widespread access to information on sexuality, in addition to being able to seek partners and services that offer resources and methods for contraception and prevention of STIs and HIV.

Activities that allow participants to deconstruct the binary division of individuals as male and female, as well as rules organizing women and men into vertical power relationships, have enabled reflections on sexual diversity and respect for differences. Aside from agreeing that some people (men) have more power than others (women), we tend to normalize individuals based on rigid paternalistic standards. By doing so, we exclude possible behaviors and expressions of sexuality. Reflecting critically on this issue, we discussed with education professionals their ability to foster potential and creativity among students. Thus, beginning with students' uniqueness, students and teachers would contribute to creating a more welcoming and supportive environment for sexual diversity.

Teachers have been open to proposals that respond to their own problems and concerns, as well as proposals responding to the problems and concerns of students. For the sustainability of initiatives in schools, one of the most important findings has been the need to involve a group of teachers in constructing educational activities. When professionals from outside organizations or teachers initiate activities without the support of others, these activities end when these professionals or teachers leave schools. There are no cookie cutter recipes, but one pathway has been to identify important issues to be discussed and find joint solutions so that everyone can develop in their uniqueness, in a respectful way.

## Two Stories of Working in Schools

### Case I

In Salvador, Bahia, initiatives in one school began by carrying out educational activities with a group of students who had participated in previous projects. These students supported the creation of strategies to carry out the "Between Us" campaign, which they adapted to their local context. In addition to airing the radio soap opera during all students' recess time, 'Bahia' versions of the story developed in the form of theatrical performances and games that reflected cultural differences. The radio soap opera launch featured a large panel in which students could express their views on what a healthy relationship consists of, based on messages raised in posters publicizing the campaign. Examples of messages on the posters were as follows: "My boyfriend does it this way. Now I only want it to be this way between us;" "My girlfriend showed me a new way. Now I only want it to be that way between us;" "Love, respect, equality between us, its so much better this way;" and finally, "And you: Have you stopped to think about it? What's your way?"

Students who did not attend the initial training, upon seeing the organization of the group, approached us with an interest in creating a strategy to mobilize students to make improvements in schools. These students founded the "Between Us" newspaper that in addition to reflecting on more equitable relationships, has a section for artistic expression, information on community activities, and discusses ways to manage more democratic schools.

The second stage of work has been to reflect on the process with teachers and discuss joint strategies they can develop themselves in schools. Based on the involvement of students, supported by a teacher and a volunteer, other teachers began to use "Between Us" campaign materials and adapt Program H and M activities in their classrooms. One of the findings from evaluating teachers after the first stage of work was that teachers did not perceive the project as collective, despite having been invited to attend meetings with students who planned the campaign. The teachers were touched by seeing the development of actions related to gender, which motivated them to continue their work.

In order to plan the next phase of actions with teachers, we organized a 16-hour workshop to reflect on boundaries, demands, and opportunities in carrying out activities about gender and sexuality. The workshop agenda was organized based on recommendations taken from conversations with coordinators (principals?) and teachers in a focus group. The focus group participants suggested that the workshops seek to simulate teachers' reflection on their personal lives, in order to facilitate changes in attitudes and relationships with students. This was one of the main results presented by the teacher who participated in the first phase of the project.

## Case II

Work in one Rio de Janeiro school began with a teacher who proposed the need to address teen pregnancy once teenage women become pregnant. In the first stage of the project, a group of teachers participated in meetings to discuss gender norms, adding reflections about their own life experiences. Based on their experiences in meetings in which they discussed gender norms and changes that occur in the body, this group of teachers raised the issues with other teachers and created a Pedagogical Plan. In this Plan, teachers would work with students on themes of gender, sexuality and diversity by reflecting about the human body. Aside from discussing the norms by which our bodies behave, or desire to express themselves in a certain way, and in addition to stereotypes and discrimination that make some bodies more valued than others, when we speak of the body we refer to it as an “instrument” that allows us to relate to our surroundings.

Having a body or being aware of our bodies means learning how we are affected by our own experiences. The body does not have to be conceived of as separate from the mind, or as something purely biological. Rather, the body is affected by emotions, feelings and thoughts. Thus, working on one's body means being opening to experiences and connecting with others, as well as fostering a will to live, desires and respect for difference. To this end, teachers in this Rio school adapted activities of the H and M Programs to more broadly address the body, and teachers have been involved in creating art exhibitions and speeches about how rigid gender roles affect our lives.

## Conclusion

Based on the experience of adapting the H and M Programs in schools, this text reflects on the importance of involving teachers in building sustainable strategies for promoting gender equality, taking into account the interests and rights of students to fully live their sexuality. Engaging teachers also means allowing them to reflect about their attitudes and difficulties they face in dealing with issues about which teachers do not naturally receive academic training but which they also experience in their own bodies. In fact, these initiatives show us that there are no cookie-cutter recipes, but indications that we can observe by raising a series of issues and seeking solutions, “between us.”

As a strategy to continue the work of involving education professionals, Promundo is building a platform for distance education. In this platform, H and M Program activities are being adapted into an interactive format will have open access for testing in classrooms and to exchange experiences.

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