

# Girls' Voices in Community Action Theatre in Tanzania

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## Abstract

Community Action Theatre is a collaborative approach to play creation designed to elicit behavior change around local issues. This essay outlines the ways in which female students at a rural secondary school in Tanzania used the platform provided by a Community Action Theatre project to focus awareness on the issue of early marriage and its intersections with HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, infant mortality and educational attainment. The students presented two plays, one for the wider community and the other for their peers. By presenting highly stigmatized and tragic consequences of the problem and tailoring the content of each play to highlight the aspects those in the audience would be able to address, the students demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the ways theatre can be used to raise awareness and inspire change.

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Community Action Theatre is an approach to community-based theatre creation that combines Theatre for Development with Behavior Change Communication. It allows theatre artists to collaborate with members of the local community to create plays about issues facing them in their local contexts, which culminate in audience discussions. The intention is for the community to see and process the causes of their problems through theatre, allowing for changes in thinking and, ultimately, new behaviors that redress the community's ills. The community-led process also foregrounds the voices of marginalized community members, in this case female students, and provides them with a platform to address their community at large and bring attention to the issues they face. In this essay I describe the ways a Community Action Theatre project allowed a group of girls at a rural secondary school in Tanzania to force their community to acknowledge the gender-specific issue of early marriage and its interconnections with expulsion from school, HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy and infant mortality.

Tanzania is a multi-ethnic country, with over 120 different tribes, although the majority are Bantu in origin. While the urban areas are populated by an intermingling of people with

different tribal identities, in rural areas the majority of the population usually shares a tribal origin indigenous to that area. However, unlike neighboring countries where inter-tribal conflict has caused enormous strife, in Tanzania people most often prioritize their national identity over their tribal ones. This is reflected in patterns of language use. While each tribe has its own language, which most Tanzanians speak as their mother tongue, virtually everyone learns Swahili at an early age. Swahili is the language of inter-Tanzanian communication and is used to teach primary school. Tanzanians fully embrace Swahili and consider it their language. Despite a colonial legacy of English and the language having official status — it is used in government and as the medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary education — Tanzanians treat it as foreign, going so far as to call it *kizungu*, (white language, derived from *mzungu*, the word for white people/foreigners) instead of *kiingereza* (English, derived from *Uingereza*, England).

These language dynamics become incredibly important when working in secondary schools, where the students switch from schooling in Swahili, a local language which is ubiquitous even in mono-tribal communities, to schooling in English, a European language that is not widely used outside of the elite in urban centers. The fact that many Tanzanian secondary school teachers are not confident in their own English skills compounds the problem, widening the gap between the urban haves and the rural have-nots as students struggle to learn in a foreign language. In this context, mastery of English becomes a prerequisite for social mobility and language choices become politicized.

The school context is also important. Typical Tanzanian schools are comprised of a number of buildings, each with several classrooms lined up end to end. These classrooms surround central spaces where school gatherings take place in the open air. The students wear uniforms with colored sweaters indicating their year. All students, regardless of gender, are required to shave their hair short, a rule which is rigorously enforced by the discipline master, who wields an enormous pair of scissors as he checks the length, snipping off a line if a student has let their hair grow too long. This emphasis on conformity extends into the classroom, where most teachers expect students to answer questions in unison and not challenge their authority.

When students do speak individually in the classroom, they are often punished for incorrect answers, sometimes with a *fimbo* (flexible stick used for corporal punishment).

It is in this context that I first undertook a community-based theater project. Catherine Njau, an English teacher at the secondary school I had been placed at for my Peace Corps service, approached me and asked if I would like to help her create a play to be performed at graduation. Given my background in theatre, I eagerly agreed. She had already started rehearsing with about a dozen female students, and together they had chosen girls' empowerment as the theme they wanted to explore with the play. Since I was not part of the initial meeting, I am not sure how much guidance the girls received in choosing the topic, but gender equality is an issue that is very much at the forefront of Tanzanian public consciousness, with the government considering it a "cross-cutting" issue to be incorporated into all subjects in the schools and local organizations striving to maintain an even gender balance in their leadership positions.

Since the play would be performed at graduation, they decided that it would be in English, the school's medium of instruction, rather than Swahili, the language of the community. Given the prestige attached to English, this choice would make the school, and by extension the graduating students, look better in the eyes of the community. However, not everyone in the audience would be able to understand the play and several of the younger students involved in the production struggled with the English dialogue.

Given the academic setting of the performance, the students wanted to illustrate the importance of education in helping Tanzanian women and girls achieve equality. In Tanzania, girls face many barriers to finishing their educations, with only 24% of girls enrolled in secondary school, compared to 31% of boys.<sup>[1]</sup> Once enrolled, early marriage, pregnancy, family responsibilities and lack of money for school fees all contribute to girls leaving secondary school before graduation 15% more often than their male peers.<sup>[2]</sup> The girls in our group wanted to show how devastating leaving school early can be on the girls who experience it. They chose to present the stories of two friends who entered secondary school together. One student, Neema, shares chores with her brother at home, which allows her time to focus on her homework. She

finishes school with high marks and eventually becomes a doctor. The other student, Grace, does not receive support from her family, which is struggling economically. Her parents complain when she wants to take time away from her housework to study. Her father arranges a marriage for her, so that he can collect her bride price, and she is forced to leave school. Years later, Grace is feeling sick and goes to see a doctor. The doctor turns out to be her old friend Neema, who she hasn't seen since leaving school. The two share their stories. In contrast to Neema's professional and economic success, Grace recounts how unhappy she's been since leaving school and explains the struggles she faces in her marriage, including poverty and domestic violence. She complains about her health, and Neema suggests she get tested for HIV. The test comes back positive. The play ends with Grace dying of AIDS.

This morality play structure is quite common in Tanzania, as is using AIDS as the ultimate tragic ending. Unfortunately, this also reflects the reality that these girls see in their community. Tanzanian law allows girls to marry at 15 with parental consent,<sup>[3]</sup> and it is estimated that 37% of girls marry before the age of 18, with girls from poor families or rural areas being more likely to marry young.<sup>[4]</sup> Despite knowledge of the risk of HIV, most married Tanzanians are unwilling to get tested and only 12% of married girls below 19 use modern methods of contraception, which leads to married girls having higher rates of HIV than their unmarried peers.<sup>[5]</sup> By showing the most negative, stigmatizing consequences of early marriage to an audience which included their families, the girls sent their community a message about their desire to stay in school and avoid marriage until their studies were complete. Given that most early marriages are arranged to financially benefit the girl's family, whose father usually receives livestock as a bride price, the choice to highlight the two characters' economic positions further strengthened their case to the community. This is particularly compelling because in Tanzania successful family members are expected to financially support their less well-off relatives. The play told the audience that by keeping their daughters in school, they could become more economically successful and their daughters would be in a better position to avoid shaming their family by contracting HIV.

The girls worked intensively on this production and took the lead on all aspects of the production, playing both male and female roles. They developed the script through repeated improvisations and helped each other with their English. They blocked their scenes, portioning off sections of the stage to serve as the school, each girl's house and the doctor's office. They brought in pieces of clothing to wear over their school uniforms as costumes, and crafted props, such as a syringe made from a discarded ballpoint pen. They rehearsed until they were confident that they could remember their lines and convey the right emotions. On the day of the performance, they presented the play to hundreds of community members, who filled the chairs arranged on the school's soccer field. Despite their nerves, they performed their story confidently, wailing with abandon after Grace passed away in the final scene. The audience stood and cheered. Although it was clear that some had struggled to understand the English dialogue, the structure of the plot was familiar enough that they could still follow the story. However, once the performance was finished, attention turned to celebrating the accomplishments of the graduating students, and there wasn't much discussion of the issues the play had raised.

Community Action Theatre (CAT), a process developed by Mgunga Mwa Mwamnyenyelwa, the artistic director of the Babawatoto Centre in Dar es Salaam, seeks to remedy this shortcoming. CAT brings professional theatre artists into communities to create plays about local concerns, with the goal of changing community members' behavior following the performance. To facilitate this behavior change, each performance culminates in a community discussion, allowing audience members to engage with the performers and strategize about ways to address the issues facing their community. Mwamnyenyelwa was inspired to create CAT when he realized that he could incorporate Behavior Change Communication — an approach to public health education where health workers collaborate with the community they're working in to create tailored communications that encourage sustained behavior change appropriate to the local context<sup>[6]</sup> — into the Theatre for Development model he was using. Mwamnyenyelwa added and improved the research component of his projects, focusing on simple methods of data collection and monitoring and evaluation techniques appropriate for the communities he was working in. He also expanded the media he used, utilizing community

mobilization partners and audiovisual methods alongside his theatrical productions and embracing performing arts traditions indigenous to the areas he was working in, including dance, storytelling, heroic recitations and ritual. In his words, he “saw that culture can be both resource and strategy to bring change.”<sup>[7]</sup>

When entering a new community, Mwamnyenyelwa begins by selecting the “artist animators,” community members who will create the theatre piece. He trains the artist animators in the CAT process and together they familiarize themselves with the local community. They spend time moving around the area in an effort to understand its culture, geography, and social and economic profiles, which helps them choose the subject matter for the production. They collect data about the topic and analyze it, looking for issues, root causes, consequences, potential solutions and key people in a position to enact those solutions. After the data analysis, they begin the process of theatre creation. Together they choose situations to present that will best illuminate the issue for the entire community, using the artistic structures that are popular in that area. After the play has been created and rehearsed, it is presented to the entire community in public performances. After each performance, the participants facilitate a community discussion focused on mobilizing the audience to change their behaviors to address the issue at hand. Mwamnyenyelwa refers to the facilitator of this discussion as “the joker” and many of the techniques he advocates, such as audience members questioning the characters about their choices or stepping into a scene to try an alternative course of action, have clear roots in Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed.

During the second year of my Peace Corps service, I participated in one of Mwamnyenyelwa’s CAT trainings with another teacher from my school. After a week learning his methods and creating a piece of theatre, we returned to our school to create a CAT performance with our students. In contrast to the first piece, where the girls chose a topic and immediately started improvising scenes, this time we began with discussion and data collection. The students, this time a mix of boys and girls, again chose early marriage as the topic they wanted to focus on. Since many of them knew girls who had left school to get married, they began by informally interviewing the young wives they knew in the area. This allowed them to

create a data tree with a much fuller analysis of the causes of the issue. They discovered that while some girls had been married off because their families needed the bride price, others had been forced to leave school due to pregnancy and had then married the men who had impregnated them. Since this play would be performed for students at the school, rather than the wider community, they chose to present the second situation. This way the key people in position to address this aspect of the problem, their fellow students, would be in the audience. They also chose Swahili as the language of the play. This would ensure that all of their classmates could understand the nuance of the dialogue and would provide a more realistic portrait of their community, since outside of school they used Swahili for the bulk of their communication. This also shifted the balance of power toward the students, since they were no longer dependent on help from their teachers to express exactly what they wanted to say.

The students presented the story of Lilian, a student, and Samweli, the motorcycle driver she falls in love with. In the area the school was located in, young men often worked driving *boda boda* (motorcycle) taxis up and down the mountain, while students who lived at the bottom regularly walked over an hour uphill to get to school. The *boda boda* drivers' income also made them appealing to the girls, and many of them found the drivers attractive. The play starts with two girls walking home, talking about their schoolwork. They pass a group of *boda boda* drivers, who chat and flirt with them, but the girls continue on their way. The next time they pass, Lilian stops and chats a little before continuing. In the next scene, she gets a lift from Samweli instead of walking to school with her friend. Her friend confronts her about it when she arrives at school, encouraging her to focus on her studies and not get distracted by boys. Unfortunately, Lilian doesn't heed her advice, and continues seeing Samweli, who gives her rides to school and buys her nice things. Eventually she gets pregnant, and the pregnancy is discovered by the school. Since teenage pregnancy is considered an "offense against morality," she is expelled from school.<sup>[8]</sup> Her family, shamed by her pregnancy, throws her out. With nowhere else to go, she moves in with Samweli and decides to marry him. She gives birth at home, but is overwhelmed and doesn't know how to care for her baby without the support of her family. The baby dies and the play ends with her being arrested.<sup>[9]</sup>

Once again, the students presented an extremely tragic situation, which reflected the experiences of the girls they interviewed. In Tanzania, 44% of girls are either pregnant or already have children by the time they turn 19, and schools regularly mandate pregnancy tests and expel pregnant students.<sup>[10]</sup> And after a teenage girl has given birth, she is barred from ever returning to public school, in a country where 77% of secondary schools are run by the government. Despite the fact that marrying or impregnating a student is illegal,<sup>[11]</sup> the law is almost never enforced and it is usually the girl alone who bears the consequences.

In addition, teenage girls are almost twice as likely to die during childbirth compared to women in their twenties.<sup>[12]</sup> While Tanzanian law permits medical abortions when the mother's life or health is in danger, there is a widespread perception that it is illegal,<sup>[13]</sup> so teenage girls attempt to induce miscarriages through the use of herbs or other drugs or bring their unwanted pregnancies to term. Once a teenage girl does give birth, her child is more likely to die before the age of five, compared to older first-time mothers.<sup>[14]</sup> Almost a third of these deaths occur in the child's first 28 days.<sup>[15]</sup> While the play remained ambiguous as to whether Lilian intentionally killed her baby, available research suggests that Tanzania's rate of early neonaticide (killing a child less than a week old) is incredibly high.<sup>[16]</sup>

The ambiguity of the play's ending left a lot of room for interpretation and the students shared their views after the performance. Some sympathized with Lilian's position, although most blamed her for bringing her problems upon herself. Many thought she should never have started dating Samweli or accepted lifts from him, repeating that she needed to focus on her studies. A few thought she could have dated him but abstained from intercourse, and one student suggested that Samweli could have used condoms, which is noteworthy in an educational system that stresses abstinence. Unlike the first play, where Grace was forced into her marriage by her family, most students recognized Lilian's agency and put forth plausible suggestions that they or their classmates could use to avoid finding themselves in her situation. A few recognized the pressure Samweli put on her, and the fact that while Lilian was facing the most dire consequences, they were both responsible for the pregnancy and subsequent marriage. Through the student-led discussion, they came up with concrete plans on how they would keep themselves



in school and support their friends as well, most of which involved avoiding the opposite sex — and the attendant attraction — almost entirely.

Together these two plays show how the students focused the play creation process on an issue that exclusively affects teenage girls, bringing community awareness to a prevalent, but often undiscussed issue. By highlighting the most extreme consequences of early marriage, they connected it with HIV and teenage pregnancy in the minds of the audience, both of which are highly stigmatized within their community. In the first play, targeted at the wider community, they addressed early marriages that are initiated by the girl's family and made a powerful case that allowing girls to finish their educations would bring economic benefits. In the second, they addressed their peers, and showed the connection between teenage pregnancy and early marriage. By using two different stories to illuminate the same issue, the students displayed a sophisticated understanding of their audience, focusing each play on an aspect of the issue that those watching would most likely be in a position to address. Language choice also affected perceptions of the two plays. Using Swahili allowed the students to create a more relatable presentation for their peers, which helped open discussion, while English brought prestige and weight to the graduation play targeted at their parents. By performing in English, the students positioned themselves as educated, with opinions worthy of respect. Performing in Swahili sent the message that they understood what their peers were going through and distanced them from the type of pre-packed answers typical in their English academic setting. Using the complete CAT process, from data collection to post-performance discussion, allowed for a deeper exploration of the root causes of the issue and possible solutions.

Community Action Theatre is a powerful force, for both communities and participants. Throughout the process the female students became more assertive and confident. During the second play, with a mixed gender cast, they maintained their right to control the message, insisting that early marriage was the single most important issue facing their peers. Mwamnyenyelwa, who has been practicing theatre in East Africa for the last twenty-six years, has observed the same phenomenon. Girls in his *TUSEME* (Let's Speak Out) project became "extremely empowered:" assertive, capable of demanding their rights and more zealous in their

pursuit of education.<sup>[17]</sup> Given the daunting challenges girls face in Tanzania, this empowerment is a necessary step on the path towards social change. These girls understand the issues facing their communities and can bring fresh perspectives to conversations about development in Tanzania. Community Action Theatre allows their voices to be heard.

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[1] *Tanzania Fact Sheet (Girls' and Women's Education)*, (Dar es Salaam: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2012), 1.

[2] "Gender Data Portal," World Bank, accessed November 5, 2016, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/tanzania>.

[3] Law of Marriage Act [Tanzania], Chapter 29 (1971).

[4] *Child Marriage Fact Sheet*, (Dar es Salaam: United Nations Population Fund, 2014), 2.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Behavior Change Communication for HIV/AIDS: A Strategic Framework*. (Arlington: Family Health International, 2002), 3.

[7] Mgunza Mwamnyenyelwa, email message to author, September 23, 2016.

[8] Brenda Akia, *No Way Out: Child Marriage and Human Rights Abuses in Tanzania* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014), 5.

[9] The lack of subtlety calls to mind the theatre of the American Black Arts Movement. For an overview see James E. Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960's and 1970's* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[10] Alisha Bjerregaard, *Forced Out: Mandatory Pregnancy Testing and the Expulsion of Pregnant Students in Tanzanian Schools* (New York: Center for Reproductive Rights, 2013), 14.

[11] Written Laws (Miscellaneous Amendment) (No. 2) Act [Tanzania], Cap 353 Part VI, (2016).

[12] Sara Cameron, *Adolescence in Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam: United Nations Children's Fund, 2011), 4.

[13] Vanessa Woog and Andrea B. Pembe, *Unsafe Abortion in Tanzania: A Review of the Evidence* (New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2013), 1.

[14] A. Sathiya Susuman and Hamisi F. Hamisi, “Under-5 Mortality in Tanzania: A Demographic Scenario,” *Iranian Journal of Public Health*, 41, no. 12. (December 2012): 12.

[15] *Children and Women in Tanzania 2010* (Dar es Salaam: United Nations Children’s Fund, 2010), 37.

[16] Anne H. Outwater, et al., “Homicide of Children in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania,” *East African Journal of Public Health*, 7, no. 4 (December 2010): 358.

[17] Mgunga Mwamnyenyelwa, email message to author, September 23, 2016.

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