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*Concept paper*

Ad-Hoc Committee for Self-Expression Clinics

MARGINAL MIND MATTERS NPC.

*"We cannot achieve sustainable development and make the planet better for all if people are excluded from opportunities, services, and the chance for a better life,"*

~ United Nations (2015)

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1. **Problem Statement**

Marginalization is denying certain individuals or groups access to the means to participate meaningfully in social life. This can relate to social, political, economic, or cultural life. In this paper, the focus will be on addressing cultural exclusion through the Margins’ Self-Expression Clinics. Self-Expression Clinics are various cultural activities geared to providing an outlet for those suffering from marginalization to speak their truth, be heard, and to be agents of social change.

The concept for the Self-Expression Clinics arose from the fact that the marginalized suffer persistent societal abuse such as hate speech, violence, and discrimination. Daily overt or microaggression causes chronic stress, anxiety, anger, and depression and these by-products of marginalization lead to social dysfunction such as civil unrest, violence, crime, domestic abuse, substance abuse, and self-harm.

The experience of marginalization isolates and disempowers and has a lasting impact on the individual habitus. The marginalized become vulnerable to stress due to prevalent exposure to trauma. They may have persistent feelings of paranoia, distrust, fear, and shame arising from the reality or perception that they are always being judged.

The marginalized may face daily stress or anxiousness from uncertainty (living conditions, joblessness, poor health, broken homes) and this will impact their ability to function and lead a productive and healthy life. Furthermore, the marginalized may feel invisible and irrelevant in society and experience a profound sense of hopelessness and helplessness. As a result, they may possess a lowered ability to resist high-risk activities, depleted sense of self or self-control.

1. **Approach**

The concept of the Self-Expression Clinics arose from Augusto Boal’s Theatre for the Oppressed (TfO) or Theatre for Development (TfD). Augusto Boal came up with the concept to respond to the structures of oppression in Brazil during the 1970s. The theatres were used as a participatory tool to get performers and the audience to engage, reflect, and effect social change and, thereby, counter the dominant uni-directional flow of information in Brazilian society at the time. The Theatre of the Oppressed used culture as a means for members of society to interrogate the society that they were rooted in and served as a call to action for the marginalized to reclaim their power.

As Bertolt Brecht once proclaimed, *“the theatrical spectacle is the beginning of action.”*

Boal’s ideology was that self-expression through the arts had the power to break conventions; provide a mirror reflecting our inner lives and the society we live in; the struggles we encounter, and the reality that is possible beyond those struggles. He believed that culture could serve as the voice for the voiceless. Theatre for the Oppressed encourages improvisation and allows audience members to take on roles in the performance or performances can be fully scripted and staged.

Performances dabble into the uncomfortable realities of the marginalized lived existence and the issues of oppression, poverty, and violence as well as possible ways to resolve these issues. It cleverly provides the space to discuss society’s most poignant problems without the repercussions of social retribution and counters the paternalism of those in power (who speak on behalf of and make decisions for the marginalized), thereby, inviting the marginalized to determine their own destiny. The marginalized can communicate things that they are ordinarily unable to through the comfort and safety of the arts, thereby, providing a sustainable tool for sensitization. Boal’s concept is being used internationally as a form of therapy, social participation, and exploratory development.

The aim of the Self-Expression Clinics is to expand Boal’s vision to conscientize communities of their marginalization and remind them that they are active participants who can effect meaningful social change. The Clinics provide a space for community members to insert themselves into performances and various other art forms, imagine ways to transform the plot, and what the outcome might be. It is the metaphorical transformation of reality and shows the marginalized that they are the main actors in their lives, and they can change their reality.

Cultural self-expression through the clinics provides an important tool for sensitization and mobilization of marginalized communities towards their own social, political, economic, and cultural emancipation. It provides a means to communicate shared concepts, images, and ideas and enables communities to think, feel, and interpret their social lives. Culture has always been a shared social activity in marginalized communities. It comes naturally to these communities and is a popular and effective means to propel the marginalized into action and can serve as a springboard for social change.

Importantly, the clinics provide generalized social support (to counter the isolation arising from marginalization). Cultural self-expression allows the marginalized performer to connect on a mental, physical, and, importantly, emotional level with the audience, thereby, developing an empathetic connection. It is a powerful means by which marginalized communities, recognizing, and reflecting on their collective experiences, bring about meaningful social change.

Social support has been shown to enhance physical and psychological wellbeing amongst the marginalized. Increased group identification buffers psychological wellbeing and increases psychological resilience. A more resilient mind means that it is more productive and better able to contribute meaningfully to society. Social support means more cohesive societies which means more resilient communities. Since marginalized groups do not have access to mainstream cultural outlets, the clinics provide a space for art that reflects the marginalized reality. Showcasing the art of the marginalized allows for the marginalized to grow social capital by; 1) building bonding social capital by performing, creating, and speaking and, in this way, allowing the marginalized to grow their self-esteem and sense of self-worth, 2) bridging social capital by expanding their networks of marginalized fellow performers and in this way collectively pushing the boundaries of social exclusion and seizing more opportunities, space, and recognition, and 3) linking social capital by providing a space for the non-marginalized to gain a sense of social exclusion through the arts.

1. **Self-Expression Clinics**

The intention is for the Self-Expression Clinics to be used to educate, capacitate, and inspire action for one’s own life and for the betterment of society. Arts can help the marginalized imagine and thus understand the issues that they face. It provides the space for the symbolic depiction of marginalized lives, drawn, exhibited, discussed together among themselves, with non-marginalized groups, and with policy makers. Imaging leads to imagining, imagining leads to action, action leads to change and it all begins with the marginalized understanding that their marginalization arises from complex forms of social oppression rather than manifestations of personal weaknesses.

Art gets to the heart of marginalization and to the hard discussions around social issues. When the marginalized choose to discuss their experiences on their own terms it is empowering and therapeutic. Forced inter-group discussions have the opposite effect. The Self-Expression Clinics counters the paternalistic, benevolent, belittling, and even discriminatory practice of outside empowerment.

* 1. **Purpose**

The Self-Expression Clinics serve three purposes:

* Create a space for marginalized groups to express themselves,
* Create awareness about marginalization amongst non-marginalized groups,
* Bring marginalized and non-marginalized groups together to build social capital and make more opportunities and support available to marginalized groups.
	1. **Projects**
* Poetry Slams at identified coffee houses,
* *My Life in Pictures* photography project (where the marginalized are given free courses in photography, they take pictures of their lives in the margins, and exhibitions are hosted where the photographs are put on display).
* Music performances and classes,
* *Life on the Margins* film making class and film festival,
* *Pushing Boundaries Contemporary Dance* classes and performances,
* *Busking in the Margins* (a series of street theatre reflecting real life on the margins to create awareness around the impact of marginalization),
* *Township Community Theatres*,
* Improv Class and techniques,
* *Living Newspaper* (storytelling, creating documentary materials, articles, interviews, public transcripts reflecting the life of the marginalized that would not be recorded elsewhere).
1. **Outcomes**

Potential outcomes from the Self-Expression Clinics Include:

* Depicting the marginalized story through the arts eradicates ignorance and increases social tolerance. This inevitably eradicates hate speech and hate crimes. The Self-Expression Clinics aim to foster a tolerant society by creating the space to leverage on our similarities rather than our differences.
* Building linkages between the different segments of society allows us to appreciate the diversity of viewpoints and this diversity creates an innovative and progressive society.
* Depicting the lived realities of the marginalized harnesses self-awareness among the marginalized (about their shared experience of social exclusion) it also harnesses self-awareness amongst non-marginalized groups. When non-marginalized groups are not self-aware, they unconsciously propagate stereotypes that are exclusionary, offensive, or derogatory. Self-awareness is therefore an important tool to reduce social prejudices and bring the marginalized and non-marginalized together to create a more unified society.
* Encourage open mindedness. When non-marginalized are not open to dialogue or to being corrected when they marginalize others, they reduce the opportunities to mitigate social exclusion. Therefore, it is important to educate non-marginalized groups about engaging the marginalized and breaking down social barriers so we can create a more inclusive society.

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