

ORGANISING FOR JUSTICE FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH STREET THEATRE

Written by:

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At DRUM (Desis Rising Up & Moving), we believe in unity and fighting against injustices together. That is how our founding organisers, who were young women in our communities, came up with the name for our programme, Eckshate, which means “together” in Bangla. We fight for gender justice together as a team and family.

The powerful young women who founded the programme realised that gender-based violence (GBV) was something in our communities that was a pressing issue, however something that was not talked about at all. We know that gender-based violence is very rampant in our communities, showing up in the form of domestic violence, street harassment, and the policing of women.

Gender-based violence is often normalised often by older generations who are accustomed to this behavior. We know that during the pandemic, as people have stayed at home for longer periods of time, gender-based violence increased. Younger women had an accessible space (DRUM) to talk about these issues and their experiences and realised how common gender-based violence truly is in our communities and society.

These women were inspired to create Eckshate so that more women can have the space to start conversations and work together to shift the dynamics of women’s roles in our society. The Eckshate cohort was inter-generational, with a mix of men and women and young and old all working together. This experience in itself was very unique. In our communities (South Asian, Indo-Caribbean, working-class, undocumented), it is very rare for men and women, and the older generation and younger generation, to collaborate. It felt surreal as young people bonded with elders and created a safe space where everyone was comfortable with each other and actively worked together.





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To form deep connections with our group, the Eckshate cohort met weekly and engaged in activities to strengthen our understanding of GBV and analyze the impact of GBV on our working class desi communities. All of us had varying understandings of the different terms such as “hetero-patriarchy” or “hegemony”. However, we all were (unfortunately) familiar with the concept of controlling women in society to extract labour and using violence as a means of sustaining patriarchy.

Eckshate’s main focus was raising awareness on gender-based issues such as domestic violence and street harassment by using methods such as street outreach, where we directly spoke to members in our community. We found that many people, both men and women, denied that gender-based violence exists. Some women even said: “I didn’t know street harassment even happens in America”. To address this issue, we looked for the best way to reach our community. Through our research and experiences of our founding members, we have heard of theatre being used by working class people in villages of West Bengal to act out important issues like domestic violence.

The theatre group will go into different communities. Not only do they train people in the villages and engage them in theatre work, but they are able to build deep relationships to the point where villagers trust them to open up about GBV in the community. The theatre groups create a presence in the community to let people know that there is work being done to combat the harmful effects of the patriarchy. They also practice community-based intervention methods where they go into people’s homes, have conversations, and support women and girls to make shifts in their homes. Through this cultural work, the way that women and girls are treated change because gender justice is not only about policy changes, but changing the hearts and minds of people. We wanted to mirror this method of cultural work.

We realised that if people were able to see these things that they experience in their own lives, in front of their eyes, they would understand what women and children go through in their homes and neighbourhoods. Our intentions were to model a world where people spoke up about these issues and how effective it can be when we as community members stand up for our neighbours and stop GBV being normalised in the culture.

Theatre is art, and art is powerful. We have witnessed how it can move people in many other movement work. The street theatre method was very useful because many people who showed up didn’t even know what they were getting themselves into.



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Only a few minutes into watching the natok did people realise we were talking about the violence in our own communities against women and girls. The natok was enticing and grabbed onto people’s attention.

We created skits about street harassment, domestic violence, and the effects of hetero-patriarchy in the home. Although our skits were fictional and based on fictional characters, it felt so real to a lot of us in the team because these were things we had experienced on almost a daily-basis in our own lives. So, the script-writing and acting felt intimate and personal, especially when we performed in front of a live audience.

Seeing all of our stories come to life on the stage was very dreamlike. We performed our skits in a local area in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York, USA, which is home to one of the biggest South Asian populations in New York. When our local community members stopped what they were doing to watch our performances, we saw that familiar look of pain and irony watching their own realities playing out in front of their eyes.

Follow this link to see Ekshate’s Street Theater about street harassment:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pH-GYwN4mWA>

Our first performance was about a mother and daughter walking down the street to buy groceries, when they are stopped by a group of guys that proceed to harass them publicly. For this skit, we had an ending that was different from what would happen in reality. Instead of having bystanders just watching, we had members of the community actually come together and protect this mother and her daughter against the people harassing them.

“Customer: (turn to the girl) We are very sorry that you had to experience that, no woman deserves to be put through such a terrible situation. We should know to teach our sons not to act this way towards a woman and to make sure that no other woman goes through this.

Isha: Thank you for stepping in! Nobody usually wants to get involved, but when no one steps in, this kind of harassment continues and it makes it seem like it’s okay to harass women!”

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Follow this link to see Ekshate’s Street Theater about domestic violence:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCst5u4iqb0>

Our second skit was based on a woman who was a victim of domestic violence. In the skit, her son saw that behavior and started exhibiting it himself in school by being violent with classmates. The woman’s husband refused to acknowledge that he was the problem.

“Mother: The school called me, letting me know that our son got in trouble for pushing a girl down. He said that he saw you doing it to me.

Dad: Shut up. He is only 10. He doesn’t know anything.

Mother: That does not matter. What matters is that our son is seeing things that he is not supposed to at this age.

Father starts yelling.

Father: What do you mean? Are you trying to say I have damaged my son?”

We created an ending where the neighbour and other community members peacefully got involved and held the husband accountable for his actions while maintaining peace. The neighbour used community-based intervention tactics: she reached out to her neighbour, being mindful about her conversation and keeping it neutral so as to not aggravate the abuser. She tried to talk to the husband in such a way that he did not retaliate against his wife after she left. This is a method that our gender justice team members have been trained in, and during the pandemic, have had successful cases of intervening and supporting survivors in the community to find safety.

Follow this link to see Ekshate’s Street Theater about gender social norms:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoXtu6jPAD8>

The third skit was about a teenage girl wanting to go to her school dance, however both her parents were completely against the idea because she was a girl. They were following the social norm and very common idea that girls should not be mingling with the opposite gender.



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Later, the girl asks her mother if she wants to join her at the DRUM membership meeting. Her mother agrees, but the father says she (his wife) cannot leave the house. She must stay at home and make sure the home is clean and food is cooked for guests coming the next day. The mother rebels and says all the work is done, so she can go to the meeting. The daughter also extends the invitation to her father, who agrees to come.

At the meeting, facilitators talk about policing women in the community. The dad becomes furious and storms out of the meeting. Two boys follow him and try to calm him down. They have a conversation where they try to get the father to understand that just because he is the breadwinner of the home and makes money by working outside, his wife also works and takes care of the entire home and family without being paid. They highlight the point that women deserve the right to make their own choices and that men should not control their decision-making powers just because they make money or are men. Men should not believe they have more power over them.

Rishi: Why did you all follow me out here?

Ishan: We are here because we want to talk to you about why you left. Is there any reason? Why do you think this is all rubbish?

Rishi: It's just rubbish! This generation has lost its mind. Everyone is going to hell! None of this matters.

Mirza: But Rishi bhai, this does matter. This is a very important topic.

Rishi: What importance is it?

Mirza: We're not letting girls and womxn have their own self-governance and rights. Can't you see?

Ishan: Womxn and girls have a right to decide for themselves what they want to do, what they want to wear, where they want to go, etc.

Rishi: Okay, I see where you're going. We already let girls and womxn have self-governance and rights. This is America, the land of the free.”

Seeing how the community reacted to our skits was the highlight of our journey because we were able to show that there is hope for a better world for our people. We saw a man crying while watching our performance, being vulnerable with us and showing appreciation of work. People came up to us and spoke about how important the work we are doing is to them and how we should keep going because we will be able to make a difference and shift the behavioral patterns in our communities.

Gender justice is an intimate area of work. People do not talk openly about the violence that they face in their homes, or even recognise that violence exists in our day-to-day lives outside the house. Our skits have given community members options on how to engage in and support survivors dealing with gender-based violence. Hearing that we were able to make a difference in even the slightest way was a really important thing for us.

People gave us their contact information for ways to get involved with our organisation and our work. Because of our successful outreaching methods, people knew about our organisation and the work we do, so they were more open in reaching out to us for assistance and advice on what to do when they were dealing with gender-based violence at home.

This spotlight chapter is part of the State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.



¹ Desi is a term used by folks in South Asian communities when talking about themselves that can be used by anyone. Sometimes it is used to talk about Indo-Caribbean communities as well.

² A natok is a performance.