

CHANGING SOCIAL NORMS

BY PAULO LYRA
COMMUNICATIONS ADVISOR WITH THE HIV/AIDS UNIT
PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION

“My son doesn’t want to see you ever again,” shouts the angry father, before slamming the front door. Clearly agitated, he paces through the house, but regains his composure as he approaches the room where his wife and son are waiting. “He is gone,” the father assures his son. The mother hugs and comforts the boy: “Don’t worry my son. You are still going to find a young man that deserves you.”

As the scene closes, the reason for the break-up becomes clear – unprotected sex.

Brazilians love soap operas. So this 30-second TV spot asking people not to discriminate against homosexual men was well-placed in the middle of a popular 8 pm soap on a June evening in 2002. Its tag line: “Respecting differences is as important as using a condom.” The message was followed by a sign-off from the ministry of health, and caught the eyes of 40 million people already glued to the screen.

The Brazilian spot used a family setting to break into unfamiliar territory. But that was just the beginning. Over the next three years, unprecedented, high-profile, mass-media campaigns, using top-rated radio slots, prime-time television, and prominent billboards, sprung up across the continent in countries as far apart as Argentina, Mexico, Chile and Colombia. This public discussion about homophobia surprised many, upset quite a few, and generated a heated public debate that may change forever the landscape for HIV prevention in the region.

The campaign organizers knew they would be controversial. They did not know just how good such controversy could be.

While Latin America is best known for machismo, homophobia is a deeply-rooted and closely-associated phenomenon. “Latin America has more homophobic crimes than any other region,” says Brazilian sociologist Luiz Mott. People point fingers, shout names, and throw dirty water at gays in public places. Homosexual men are fired from jobs, expelled from clubs, and barred from churches. A worrying number of cases end in violence. In June 2004, Octavio Acuña Rubio, a psychologist and well-known human rights activist, was stabbed to death in his office in Queretaro, Mexico. In Brazil, it is estimated that 1,960 homosexuals were murdered between 1980 and 2000.

This environment couldn’t be better for the propagation of HIV. Stigma, discrimination and violence lead to low self-esteem and self-efficacy (one’s judgment of one’s capabilities, for instance, to negotiate condom use), which leads to HIV. And HIV leads, of course, to more stigma and discrimination.

Latin America has one of the most “masculine” HIV epidemics. For every 10 young men aged 15-24 with the virus, there are six HIV-positive females in the region, 15 worldwide and almost 30 in sub-Saharan Africa. Of the AIDS cases registered from 1983 to 2005 in Mexico, 83 percent were men. Among them, men who have sex with men (MSM) are at particular risk. In Brazil, the chances of gay, transgender or straight-looking homosexuals having HIV are 11 times greater than that of heterosexual men.

Several countries adopted anti-discriminatory constitutions, as part of the democratization process that swept the region in the 1980s. Other initiatives like distrib-

uting condoms and leaflets in gay bars helped to raise awareness, protect MSM, and strengthen their communities. But compared with reduction of prevalence in similar groups in the developed world, the overall results were disappointing.

In April 2005, Mexico launched its campaign with two radio spots in the 12 “most homophobic” states. It took them six months to get the right approach and to reach a consensus within the government and civil society. Just like the Brazilian campaign, the family was the setting for the radio spot, “Dinner Time:”

Mother: You seem to be very much in love, my son.

Son: That’s right, mom.

Mother: How long have you been going out?

Son: Five months already.

Mother: Are you happy we are having dinner together?

Son: Very much. I will prepare a nice dessert.

Mother: I just hope both of you like what I will cook. What is his name again?

Son: Oscar, mom. I already told you. His name is Oscar!

Background voice: Does this seem unusual to you? Homophobia is the intolerance to homosexuality. Equality begins when we recognize that all of us have the right to be different.

What is so “unusual” about these campaigns? That they break a taboo subject? Yes. Their daring tone? Yes. Their most remarkable feature, however, was the effort to change the social norm. For the first time, ministries of health across

the region, working together with civil society, moved away from individual behavior change campaigns and focused instead on changing society as a whole, in this case, its centuries-old attitude towards homosexual men. For the first time in MSM prevention initiatives, the general public was the target audience, while the gays were the protagonists. For the first time, homophobia was portrayed in the mass media as a public health problem.



PHOTO BY MINISTRY OF SOCIAL PROTECTION, COLOMBIA

FIVE MASS MEDIA CAMPAIGNS TO COMBAT HOMOPHOBIA

In Colombia and Chile, the anti-homophobic component was part of a broader condom promotion campaign targeting different audiences. Colombia used a subtle approach, depicting a very normal, urban, middle-class, young, male couple that aimed to confront existing attitudes without aggravating the viewers. In each spot, the couple wore different clothing, hinting at a stable relationship contrary to the stereotype that gay men are promiscuous. They were “normal,” successful and they used condoms. The Chilean campaign also used two young homosexual men to promote condom use. Asked by the campaign tagline: “What is your position?” The two reply: “With love and without prejudice.”

Argentine Campaign Creates Uproar

By contrast, the Argentine campaign was inadvertently audacious. “There are more things that don’t transmit HIV than do” portrayed a series of daily-life situations that cause no risk of HIV infection – donating blood, safe pregnancy, using condoms, hugging and kissing – illustrated by different population groups like couples, mothers and young people. For the message, “Hugging does not transmit HIV,” the ad agency suggested the photo of a homosexual couple. They were indeed hugging, but above all they were kissing each other passionately on the mouth.

Latin Americans tolerate effeminate depictions of homosexual men, but public displays of affection are soundly rejected. Not long after the kissing-hug

IN LATIN AMERICA

picture was displayed in Buenos Aires bus stops, several billboards were covered with protesting messages such as “I don’t want my money spent on this” and “We don’t want our children to see this.”

It took several weeks and huge damage control for the campaign organizers, the Argentine Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM), to rectify the damage. Yet, the overall result was surprisingly positive. The CCM received congratulatory messages from different parts of the country and abroad. Newspapers picked up the issue, initially focusing on the controversy, but soon moved to investigate why homophobia is still so prevalent in Argentina. TV shows organized debates around the theme. What started as a smaller component of a larger campaign took on a life of its own and brought homophobia to the center of the country’s public agenda.

In Mexico, the controversy played out in a similar way. One bishop told the media it would lead to the “degradation of the human being and of the Mexican society.” Some state governments tried to prevent the broadcast. Yet, the huge public debate that followed galvanized remarkable support. A group of mothers and fathers for sexual diversity went to newspapers to support the choices of their sons and daughters. Intellectuals and artists expressed solidarity. Another set of state governments provided funds for extra broadcasts in the local media. To reach this outcome, the national AIDS commission CONASIDA relied on two main strategies: quoting extensively the international commitments subscribed to by the country, and the candid and authoritative support to the campaign by the Secretary (minister) of Health, Julio Frenk.

The Brazilian campaign was the most wide-ranging and the most expensive. Because of the complexity and scale, Brazil took two years to develop the campaign. For each possible criticism they had a ready-made reply and an outside spokesperson, such as a university professor or a civil society representative. Journalists knew months in advance about the campaign, and why it was so important to address homophobia straightforwardly. A web site was created to allow supporters and protesters to share their opinions. The supporting postings were quite touching. One young man said: “For the first time in my life I felt I was a citizen. Thank you so much.”

In Chile, a country that spent six years without a mass-media campaign on HIV because of the opposition from conservative groups and the church, there was

much debate about the depiction of a gay couple. But it took a back seat to the promotion of condoms which remained the focus of the disagreement. In Colombia, somehow disappointingly, neither the couple, nor the condoms provoked reaction. “We knew it could be contentious,” said Ricardo Luque, the manager of the national AIDS program involved in producing the TV spots. A defense for each possible attack was in place. But they did not come. “Sometimes I wonder if we did something wrong,” he jokes.

Because of the cultural and geographic proximity, it is logical to assume a domino effect from the campaigns. Apparently this did not happen. Each of the campaign developers had little or no information about the parallel processes in neighboring countries. In spite of the months or years it took them to be launched, most of the processes were internal and confidential, as a leak could easily preempt the whole effort. It seems that the coincidence in the dates of the campaigns was the result of the simultaneous maturity in the region. “The campaigns were the natural outcome of the search for more effective mechanisms to prevent HIV/AIDS in homosexual men,” said the national AIDS manager of Brazil, Mariângela Simão.

The Global Fund financed the Argentine campaign and part of the Chilean. PAHO provided supplementary funds to Mexico. The bulk of the money, however, came from governments. The five campaigns cost US\$ 6 million. A small sum for breaking such a taboo subject in countries that account for 70 percent of the population of Latin America.

Were the campaigns successful? As with most communication initiatives, little time and effort was allocated to measure the impact. Only Brazil made a formal evaluation, and that was limited to a recall survey. We don’t know how the campaigns will affect the social attitude towards homosexual men in the years to come. Homophobia is a complex and deeply rooted problem in the region. But anecdotal evidence of success is unequivocal, chiefly lodged in the public debate that accompanied the campaigns and the visible empowerment of the homosexual community. These achievements suggest that Latin homophobia may now be more of a stereotype than an irreversible mindset.

The PAHO report, “Mass media campaigns against homophobia in Latin America,” will be available June 2006. For further information, contact lyrapaul@paho.org.



Public messages in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico stating that homophobia, not homosexuality is the problem. Center: Billboard covered with protesting messages, such as “I don’t want my money spent on this.”

PHOTOS: TL MOH, BRAZIL, BL & C, AGENCIA MIX, ARG., R: CONAPRED, MEX.

Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación. CONAPRED
Por una Nueva Cultura de la Igualdad.
01 800 543 0033
www.conapred.org.mx