



COMBATING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE THROUGH DOCUMENTARY FILMS AND DISCUSSIONS AT THE “INCONVENIENT FILMS” FESTIVAL

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This short guideline to inspire and spread the idea that documentary films can help to increase the awareness about the gender based violence and contribute to policy changes in the field.

With the rise of feminism and growing understanding that gender based violence is both a crime and a severe human rights violation, a growing number of documentaries talking about such violence and analyzing the impact of the patriarchy in socializing both boys and girls have emerged. The documentaries often talk about extremely traumatic, life threatening experiences and give the audiences a unique opportunity to get close to what women, who experienced systematic violence, had to go through. The films also embody the theory about the origins of gender based violence, how do the perpetrators gain the control and power over the victims, why it is hard to leave the violent partner and many other things. People can read, for sure, about these problems in manuals and books, however, documentaries give a chance to understand how does the theory looks in practice and empathize with that.

This emergence of the documentaries and the support of the European Union Rights Citizenship and Equality Programme 2014 - 2020, Swedish and the US embassies in Vilnius provided an opportunity to the human rights documentary films festival "Inconvenient Films", based in Vilnius, Lithuania to include films on gender based violence in the festival's programme in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. In the period of 4 years, almost 40 film screenings followed by discussion panels took place in different cities and towns in all Lithuania. The festival is co-organized by the Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights (LCHR) which is a human rights advocacy and education NGO and curated the panels and discussions.

This guideline is a concise summary of the experiences and good practices that LCHR has gained in the course of these four years. The guideline is based on the notes made during the period, insights of members of the team - festival programmers and discussion panels organizers and concrete examples from the screenings and the discussions. We hope that it will serve as a source of practical ideas how to use the format of documentary screening + discussion for advancing women' rights and fighting gender based violence.





The biases that victims of gender based violence faces

In the second half of the XXth century women' rights movements have achieved that violence against women and domestic violence became a criminal offence in many parts of the world. The feminist theorizing and practices have even reached the level on international agreements and set standards in protecting women from such crimes. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 70's. In 2011 another convention - The Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) - was adopted by the Council of Europe. The whole document was designated on setting a unifying standard on how to fight gender based violence, which is directed against women: stalking, sexual harassment, sexual violence (including rape), physical, and psychological abuse at the hands of intimate partners, forced marriage, and forced sterilization. However, the level of understanding and acknowledgement of the diversity of the cruel behaviors against women varies from country to country. Some countries might have a relatively strong legal base, others might lack legal protections and does not acknowledge some forms of violence (for example, sexual violence within marriage, etc.).

The victims of gender based violence face not only legal gaps, but also often unfavorable or even adverse attitudes, little or no understanding. They are victimized and seen as incapable to make their life choices and at the same responsible for what happened to them: they should have known to who are they marrying or starting and relationship. The prevalence of these attitudes might vary from country to country. Here, in Lithuania, public opinion polls show that 50 - 66 % of the population support victim blaming to a lesser or greater extent.

In such environment is it extremely hard or almost impossible to seek help, justice and end the violent relationship. The festival saw and continues to see changing such attitudes, addressing necessary changes in policies and providing space for the victims of gender based violence as a part of the mission. We strongly believe that documentary genre can act as the medium and lead to greater understanding of the gender based violence phenomenon and its gradual eradication.





Why film and a discussion

Documentary films are a powerful tool to expose human rights violations, abuses and motivate audience to take action. Often they are in-depth and informative resources which is a great platform to create dialogue. However, documentary films also generate emotions, empathy and brings people to a temporal community that is united by a powerful story-telling. Therefore, such films are in a unique position to act as starting point for further discussions: after a screening people that might come from different walks of life are given a resource to talk and discuss the issues that they just have seen in the screen. In this way, everybody has a source of knowledge and reference, no matter how much they had known about the topic before the screening.

Documentary films:

- Trigger emotions and invite to empathize;
- Provide with information and facts;
- Create and temporal community;
- Create a starting point to discuss often complicated issues.

It is also important to note, that despite the power of the documentary films as a media, discussions after the films are of crucial importance, especially, if the films discuss such complicated problems as gender based violence. Similarly as documentaries, they also serve as a knowledge equalizing tool: even though films do evoke empathy, however, due to the complexity of the topic, usually they cannot provide all the necessary information, for example, about the power and control wheel, local context, knowledge and information on, for example, where to seek help in case of such violence.

Discussions:

- Equalize knowledge;
 - Localize;
 - Explain complexity of the issue;
 - Provide a space to reflect in groups and share thoughts.
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Therefore, documentary films and discussions after them is a unique combination of knowledge, empathy and a source of deeper understanding. Such combinations can be used with different aims and goals: raise awareness, promote policy changes or encourage to seek help.

Documentary film selection

Throughout the four years, we realized that the film screenings and the discussions that we organize usually fall into three categories with three different goals 1. to raise awareness, 2. to promote policy changes or 3. to encourage to seek help. The three discussion types will be further discussed in the following section. However, a clearly identified goal is important when selecting films for the screenings. For example, the films that concentrate their attention to one specific case might not be relevant if the goal of the event is to raise awareness among the members of the general audience. But such film most likely will be indispensable if the organizers are targeting possible victims of the gender based violence and are aiming at encouraging them to seek help. Therefore, it is important to have a clear idea what is the goal of the screenings and the discussions, prior to the selection of the film. These expectations should be communicated to the festival programmer responsible for the selection of the film, so the documentary screenings would work as medium to concentrate the attention to the goal instead of directing it to something else.

It is well known that violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world. It knows no social, economic or national boundaries. According the United Nations Population Fund, worldwide, an estimated one in three women will experience physical or sexual abuse in her lifetime. However, such violence often has its local realities that is influenced by the political, cultural, religious, socioeconomic etc. background. Therefore, even though the documentaries might talk about the same phenomenon - gender based violence - however, at the same time they might have relatively little in common with the realities of the place where they are screened.

For example, some women activists might be fighting for the criminalization of the domestic violence in their national criminal codes, while others might be facing state's law enforcement professionals' and society's unwillingness to



acknowledge that sexual violence that takes place within marriage is sexual violence. Also, while the internal situation and the dialogue regarding the women' right to live violence-free life in some countries might very active and reach the top political agenda, the situation in other countries might experience stagnation at the given time.

Therefore, even though the documentaries that have little to do with the local realities can be a good way to educate people on different situations that women face, however, they can have opposite results from what one might expect: they confirm that the situation in their respective countries is not as bad after all as in the countries or regions shown in the documentaries and work counter productively. In order to avoid such situations, the selection of the documentaries should also be based on how to localize the film, evaluate if the film works as a productive and eye-opening film and goes hand in hand with the goals set for the event.

How to organize the discussions?

As mentioned in the section “Why film and a discussion”, the “Inconvenient Films” festival defined three different types of discussions, which aimed to raise awareness, promote policy changes and encourage to seek help. All three type discussions were organized in the course of the four years. The following section will present main ideas behind the different types and will provide useful tips how to organize them.

Awareness raising

Even though gender based violence is a common in many communities in Lithuania, public opinion polls show that people often tend to think that this something that they don't actually have much to do with: some people think that it happens to “certain” type of people (people who are addicted to alcohol or drugs; lower socio-economic background; people who are in “bed” relationships, etc.). Others might have encountered violent situations or know that somebody experiences violence but felt helpless and did not know how to support and help



to the victim. The experienced stress made them normalize the situation(s) and take gender based violence as unavoidable part of the reality. There are, of course, many more reasons why people might chose to do so, however, the encounter with a documentary story often revitalize the empathy and the sense of injustice, bring the experience of the gender based violence to the focus and motivate to do act.

In order to correspond those needs, the moderator and composition of the panel needs to foresee this and to prepare and reflect the needs of the audience. That often includes but it is not limited to:

- Having a well trained psychologist on the panel. The role of psychologist is to explain how to approach somebody who experiences gender based violence; what can be done and how not to overstep with help, leaving the final word to the victim; why victims of such violence often forgive and try again and again to rebuild the relationship with the partner who is violent and how to provide support, not the judgment;
- Have a law enforcement officer who can explain how the justice system works; what to do if a life threatening situation occurs; how to collect evidence if the violence is psychological, economic, which is often harder to prove in the court room, etc.;
- Consider having a local celebrity/ influencer on the panel who would serve a reassuring figure that this topic is important and serve as a role model;
- Have leaflets ready; direct people to the quality resources online where people can find more information both on gender based violence, existing help, help lines, etc.

Policy changes

Documentaries that sensitize and give a close look into the gender based violence problem can be used as a platform for advocating changes in the policy. Usually meetings that concern the policy changes take place in formal settings, they are less emotionally connected to the real life situations, and involve different actors that might see the problem and the solutions to it very differently. Having a documentary screening that talks to the problem that needs to be addresses in a policy change and a discussions after the screening helps to connect the necessary changes and the real life experiences, empathize with the victims and look for solutions in a more empathetic way.





This format can be used to address local and national level policy makers. In 2018 the festival toured with a film “Better Man”, which portrayed a man who systematically beat his girlfriend in 90’s Canada. The film rested on the dialogue between the former victim and the former perpetrator where he listened about the harm that he had done and they both went through extremely violent episodes that had taken place in the past. The tour involved not only big cities, but also included smaller towns.

After this extremely sensitive film, local policy makers, law enforcement officials and women’ rights activists were invited to discuss how their towns deals with the gender based violence in front of the audience that came to see the film as well. For many of them it was a new way to come together, to reflect the film and to discuss the existing gaps in coordinating their efforts in responding to the violence. Due to the sensitive content of the film, panelists chose to speak using a very respectful wording while naming the existing problems, which led to constructive discussion and concrete decisions. For example, a police officer in northern Lithuania expressed her concern that the information from the child protection services reach police in a fragmented manner: they often have to call and double check if the children from suspected violent environments were removed or left home. Based on this information, police often decided how often they should make a preventing visits and check how the family is doing. During the discussion the police officer and the representative of the child protection services agreed to have a meeting and discuss how to make the exchange of the information more efficient and constructive.

Equally, screenings of the documentaries and discussions after them can be used a space to discuss the necessary national level changes. For example, back in 2017 the festival had a tour of ten screenings and discussions in the all Lithuania about gender based violence. The documentary film “Intimate Battles” screenings were used as a way to invite people to the cinema, but also to stay for the the discussion, which was devoted to the Istanbul Convention.

The film presented the stories of 10 different women from 10 different cultures who experienced psychological, physical and sexual violence. The film went into a great detail of some aspects of their experiences and provided a explanation of what the circle of violence is, what legal protection the victims often lack and how the help system fail them through a very personal story telling.

During the discussions the panelists talked both what the Convention is, why is was created and why Lithuania had not ratified the Convention yet. The documentary served as an effective way to explain what practical problems the Convention covers and how it would improve the state’s response to the gender based violence if the document would finally be ratified.





Seeking help

Finally, discussions can be used as a way to recognize the violence and encourage to seek help and justice. These type of discussions will typically target women, however, they can also be useful to men who, for example, became the victims of gender based violence in their childhood (children who witnessed violence are also victims of the crime).

Such discussion panels will typically include women who came out from violent relationships and their experience sharing, psychologists and other professionals that work in the field of victim support. It is highly recommended that panelists for such discussions, especially former victims, would be found through victim support centers: violence is an extremely traumatizing experience that can be brought back in such discussions. Therefore, it is important to talk through the possible panelists about the risk and evaluate together if the woman is ready to share with the audience with no further harm triggered.

It's important to notice that violence against women is criminalized in most countries, however, the existing legal and societal systems often do not respond to the existing challenges in seeking support, protection and justice. This is especially is true when it comes to the violence forms that are not evident from the first sight or do not leave visible marks, such as bruises. Namely, psychological, economic and sexual violence not always leave bodily injuries. These forms of violence are the ones that the audiences are often not aware of as well. Therefore, talking through them with the women who have experienced that can help other women with similar experiences to identify them and understand the injustice that is being done to them.

Such discussions can have a validating effect that something that one goes through or is witnessing is important, worth to take care of and lessens the feeling that "this is happening to me only". In a discussion in Rokiškis, which is a northern town in Lithuania, a women stood up asked with the tears in her eyes what she should do - she said that she does not want to dismantle a family, but her daughter is experiencing violence from her husband. She asked the women, former victim of the gender based violence, what she should do and how to handle the situation. It was a very touching moment and both the panelists and the audience was amazed by the courage that the woman showed.





Diversity in representation

It is also important to be conscious about who can speak openly about the experienced violence and who cannot; how does that affect how people perceive the problem; if the discussion establishes and confirms stereotypes and norms that will further infringe women' access to justice, services and how society will perceive the problem. With the first discussions in 2017, an understanding came that there is a strong conviction in Lithuania that violence against women is often an outcome of alcohol abuse, which is associated with the lower income people. This alleged correlation is often confirmed by the police statistics, which overwhelmingly demonstrates that violence against women often takes place in the household where alcohol consumption is frequent.

Even though it is true that alcohol often acts as a trigger for the violent behaviour against women, however, the alcohol itself does not cause it (if that was the case, violent behaviors would be inherent to alcohol abuse and would not have the correlation with the victim's gender), however, such convictions form a stereotypical image of the victim, marginalizes the problem and normalizes the gender based violence in the certain (for example, alcohol abuse) contexts. Women who do not fit the alcohol abusing lower income family images avoid to speak put about the violence that they experience, fearing to go lower in the societal hierarchy rank; the institutions excuse themselves from effective dealing with the violence and helping out the victims as they perceive the problem to be alcohol related, not a question of the justice or victim support system;

Back in 2017, a well intended police officer in Anykščiai, who participated in the panel, gave this speech on how police officers feel empathetic about women who live with the men who abuse alcohol and beats from time to time. A gender equality specialist who was also on the panel, asked if she thinks that women from middle class or upper income women do not experience violence. The police officer stopped for a moment and started counting women in the town that she knows and who might be experiencing gender based violence. She was astonished to understand that they never sought the help from the police and started analyzing why she though that they don't really need any help and why she associated violence with bad socio-economic situation exclusively.





To sum up, discussions on gender based violence often are at a great risk of presenting a certain image of the problem: women from middle or upper income families rarely want to speak in such panels, law enforcement institutions quote their statistics on crime and tend to reinforce the false correlation. Therefore, it cannot be overstated how important it is to present the full spectrum of the gender based violence problem, find and invite victims from different socio-economic, ethnic, religious backgrounds, education levels who have experienced violence. The representation of the full variety of experiences prevents linking the problem to one particular group or identity. It is also important to apply these lenses when inviting the experts to the panel. Often, the gender equality field is dominated by women, men rarely work in the field, therefore, the audiences tend to perceive the violence against women as a women' issues. Ensuring a gender balance in the panel destroys the myth that the violence against women is not a men' problem.

Discussion safety and taking into account the audience's sensitivities

Throughout the period of the four years, we have witnessed women, their relatives and friends coming to the screenings and staying for the discussions. Some of them came accidentally, randomly choosing films and actually knowing that a discussions after a screening is planed. Some people came with the goal to learn more about the available help and see for themselves if they are ready to use it or help someone close who is experiencing gender based violence. Therefore, it cannot be overstated how important it is to create a welcoming atmosphere where people won't hear victim blaming and would not feel discouraged from taking action. In order to ensure that, it is important to set the discussion rules before it starts: the moderator should communicate that this space is a safe space, so people should abstain from jumping into conclusions and ask questions in a respectful and reflective manners. The audience should be informed that gender based violence is a prevalent human rights violation, so it is highly possible that there are people in the audience who might have sensibilities regarding the topic. It should be stated that is it event's





policy to ensure their safety and allow them together with the group feel supported rather than discouraged. In case, somebody from the audience violates this rule (ask questions or speaks in the impolite, victim blaming manner) the moderator and if necessary, the event organizer should react and to leave no doubt where they stand, if necessary, ask the person to leave the hall.

In 2018 in an event in Telšiai, a northwestern town in Lithuania, a member of the audience raised a hand asked a question why the victim of the violence who was on the panel married the violent man as, according to him, she probably must have known that he is violent. This is one of the classical victim blaming strategies which implies that the victim is responsible for what happened to her (she must have known, therefore, the violence that she experienced is something that she sought for herself and deserved). The question/ statement came after the woman on the panel shared some cruel violence episodes. The panel moderator reacted immediately: she named that the question/ statement blames the victim for the violence that she had experienced and that the perpetrator, not the victim should explain himself and moved to the next question.

When taking into account the needs of those who come to the event and have sensitivities due to the experienced or witnessed violence, it is also important to understand that in many cases these people will not feel comfortable to speak up or ask for help directly. Especially in front of the audience. The organizers should think about more subtle ways how to encourage this segment of the audience - providing information or encouraging to seek help can be life saving.

Such help and encouragement can come in different ways: in 2017 - 2018 when touring in Lithuania LCHR made leaflets with all the necessary information what to do or where to call in case of violence. The leaflets were either left on every cinema hall seat or given to each cinema goer who came to the screening. In this way everybody received information without having to show an interest to anyone else that they need it. Another, a more open strategy, can be having someone from the help providing organizations on the panel and ensuring that the specialist will not leave the cinema hall immediately after the discussion: she or he should be left alone by the organizers ensuring that people in need can approach and have a conversation or ask a question in a relative privacy.

To sum up, when organizing a documentary film screening and a discussion after that, it is important to take into account that people who have experienced and have witnessed violence might be in the audience. Ensuring a safe space and providing information in different ways are of crucial importance, it prevents retraumatization and gives an opportunity to get help in an acceptable manner.





Conclusion

Gender based violence is deeply rooted problem that will take all the available tools to root it out. Documentaries with discussions can be one of them. They are unique in evoking empathy, awaken the sense of injustice and at the same time providing the audiences with information and facts. They can be used as an awareness tool, call for a change in policy and encouragement to seek help. We hope that this shirt guideline inspired you to use this powerful way to connect and fight injustice be it at documentary film festival or film screening.

