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### Review Article

# Forum Theatre as a Health Promotion Intervention for Sensitive Issues of Sexual Violence and Reproductive Health: A Literature Review

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#### Abstract

**Background:** Sexual violence and reproductive health issues remain major public health concerns among adolescents and young adults. Conventional health education often fails to address these sensitive topics effectively due to social stigma and limited participant engagement. Forum theatre has emerged as a participatory, arts-based approach that encourages dialogue, critical reflection, and active learning.

**Aim:** This study aimed to analyze the effectiveness of forum theatre in improving knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, and behavioral intentions related to sexual violence prevention and reproductive health.

**Method:** A descriptive-analytical literature review was conducted using articles published between 2015 and 2024 from PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Garuda. The selection process followed PRISMA guidelines. A total of 12 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic synthesis.

**Results:** Forum theatre interventions consistently improved participants' knowledge of sexual consent and reproductive health ( $p < 0.05$ ), reduced acceptance of gender-based violence, and enhanced self-efficacy in resisting coercion and seeking help. Behavioral intentions, including reporting violence and practicing safer behaviors, also showed significant improvement. Emotional engagement and participatory learning were identified as key mechanisms driving these outcomes.

**Conclusion:** Forum theatre is an effective and culturally adaptable approach for addressing sensitive issues in sexual violence prevention and reproductive health promotion. Its integration into educational and community-based programs may strengthen public health interventions.

**Keywords:** *forum theatre; sexual violence prevention; reproductive health; participatory learning; health promotion.*

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence and reproductive health issues are critical public health concerns that disproportionately affect adolescents and young adults. Sexual violence refers to any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act through coercion, while reproductive health encompasses a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system. These interconnected issues significantly contribute to adverse health outcomes,

including unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and long-term psychological trauma [1,2].

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that nearly one in three women globally have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, with many cases occurring during adolescence. In Indonesia, sexual violence remains a pressing issue, with reported cases increasing each year, indicating both heightened awareness and persistent systemic challenges. Additionally, limited access to comprehensive reproductive health education continues to place adolescents at risk of unsafe sexual behaviors and poor health outcomes [3,4].

The underlying causes of sexual violence and poor reproductive health outcomes are multifactorial, involving social, cultural, and structural determinants. Social stigma, cultural taboos surrounding sexuality, gender inequality, and limited interpersonal communication skills are among the most significant barriers to effective prevention. In many communities, discussions about sexual and reproductive health remain sensitive and are often avoided, leading to misinformation, low awareness, and reduced capacity among adolescents to protect themselves from violence and health risks [5,6].

The consequences of these issues are substantial and long-lasting. In the short term, victims of sexual violence may experience physical injury, emotional distress, and social isolation. In the long term, exposure to violence is associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other non-communicable health problems. Furthermore, inadequate reproductive health knowledge contributes to cycles of vulnerability, particularly among young populations, thereby reinforcing broader public health challenges [7,8].

Despite the urgency of these problems, conventional health promotion strategies, such as lectures and printed educational materials, have shown limited effectiveness in addressing sensitive topics and transforming social norms. These approaches are often passive and fail to actively engage participants or challenge the underlying power dynamics that sustain silence and stigma.

As an alternative, participatory approaches such as forum theatre, derived from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, have emerged as innovative strategies in health promotion. Forum theatre encourages active participation through storytelling, role-play, and dialogue, allowing individuals to critically reflect on real-life situations and explore potential solutions. Evidence suggests that this method can improve awareness of sexual consent, enhance communication skills, reduce stigma toward survivors, and empower adolescents to challenge harmful gender norms [9–13].

However, existing studies on the application of forum theatre in sexual violence prevention and reproductive health promotion remain varied and fragmented. Differences in study design, intervention duration, participant characteristics, and evaluation methods make it difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions regarding its effectiveness. Moreover, there is still a lack of synthesized evidence that systematically evaluates the role of forum theatre within this specific context.

Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of forum theatre in addressing sexual violence and reproductive health issues is essential to support evidence-based health promotion strategies. This study aims to review empirical research published between 2015 and 2024, identify methodological strengths and limitations, and provide recommendations for future implementation of forum theatre in public health practice.

## METHODS

### Study Design

This study employed a literature review using a descriptive-analytical approach. The primary objective was to collect, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of forum theatre as a participatory intervention in addressing sexual violence and promoting reproductive health among adolescents and young adults.

### Data Sources and Search Strategy

A systematic search of the literature was conducted across several reputable electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Garuda. The search was limited to articles published between 2015 and 2024 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant evidence.

The search strategy was guided by a combination of keywords and Boolean operators (AND/OR), including: “forum theatre”, “theatre of the oppressed”, “participatory drama”, “sexual violence”, “gender-based violence”, “sexual consent”, “reproductive health”, and “arts-based health promotion”. In addition to peer-reviewed journal articles, selected reports and relevant references cited within identified studies were also screened to ensure comprehensive coverage.

### Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility. Articles were screened in three stages: title screening, abstract review, and full-text assessment. Inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (1) articles published between 2015 and 2024; (2) studies employing forum theatre or Theatre of the Oppressed as the primary intervention; (3) studies focusing on sexual violence, sexual consent, gender-based violence, or reproductive health; (4) empirical studies reporting measurable outcomes; and (5) publications in English or Indonesian.

Exclusion criteria included: (1) conceptual or theoretical papers without empirical data; (2) non-interactive drama interventions; (3) dissertations, theses, or conference abstracts without full text; and (4) studies not relevant to the research objectives.

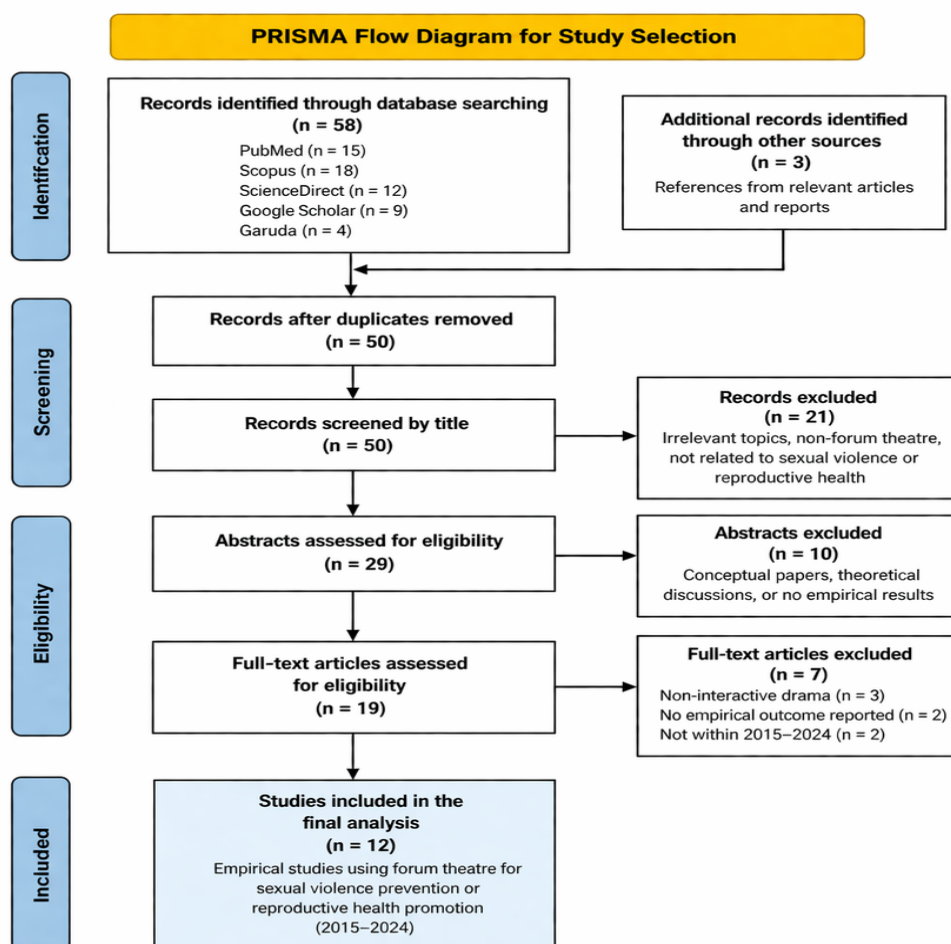
Through this systematic screening process, a total of 58 articles were initially identified. After removing duplicates and applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 12 articles were selected for final analysis.

### Data Extraction and Analysis

Data from the selected studies were systematically extracted using a standardized framework, including author(s), publication year, country of study, study population, intervention characteristics, outcome variables, and evaluation methods.

A thematic synthesis approach was applied to analyze the findings. The outcomes were categorized into four main domains: (1) knowledge improvement, (2) attitudes and social norms, (3) self-efficacy, and (4) behavioral intentions. This categorization was informed by established frameworks in health promotion and arts-based intervention research.

The synthesis focused on identifying patterns, consistencies, and variations across studies to generate a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of forum theatre interventions in sexual violence prevention and reproductive health promotion.



Note: The selection process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines.

**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow chart of the literature search and study selection process.

## RESULTS

The literature search yielded a total of 12 studies that met the predefined inclusion criteria after a systematic screening process. The included studies were conducted across diverse geographical settings, including Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America, and predominantly targeted adolescents and young adults as the main population.

The majority of the selected studies employed qualitative, quasi-experimental, mixed-method, and review designs. These studies utilized participatory approaches, particularly forum theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed, to address sensitive issues such as sexual violence, sexual consent, gender-based violence, and reproductive health. The interventions were implemented in various settings, including schools, universities, and community-based programs.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Included Studies

No	Researcher (Year)	Research Title	Research Design	Variables Studied	Main Findings
1	Houston S & McCollum E (2017)	Using forum theatre to address stigma and promote dialogue on sensitive social issues	Qualitative study	Attitudes, stigma, social norms	Forum theatre significantly reduced stigma and encouraged open discussion regarding sensitive issues, including sexual violence.
2	Jain S et al. (2019)	Theatre-based interventions in public health: a systematic review	Systematic review	Knowledge, attitudes, behavior	Theatre-based interventions improved knowledge and attitudes toward health issues and increased participant engagement.
3	Mlambo-Ngcuka P et al. (2020)	Participatory theatre for gender norm transformation	Participatory theatre for gender norm transformation	Gender norms, attitudes	Participatory theatre was associated with improved gender-equitable attitudes and reduced acceptance of violence.
4	Haberland N & Rogow D (2015)	Sexuality education: emerging trends in evidence and practice	Literature review	Knowledge, behavior	Interactive and participatory approaches improved sexual health knowledge and behavioral outcomes.
5	Goldstein TR et al. (2018)	The impact of drama-based pedagogy on empathy development	Experimental study	Empathy, attitudes	Drama-based interventions significantly increased empathy and

					social awareness among participants
6	Bundy P (2017)	Applied theatre and social change: engaging youth in participatory learning	Qualitative study	Engagement, attitudes	Applied theatre enhanced youth engagement and critical reflection on social issues.
7	Sloman A (2012)	Using participatory arts for health promotion	Literature review	Health outcomes, awareness	Participatory arts contributed to improved awareness and psychosocial health outcomes.
8	Prentki T & Preston S (2016)	Theatre for development and social transformation	Review study	Social norms, participation	Theatre interventions promoted community participation and challenged harmful social norms.
9	Kerrigan D et al. (2020)	Forum theatre intervention for sexual violence prevention among adolescents	Quasi-experimental	Knowledge, attitudes	Significant improvement in knowledge of sexual consent and reduction in acceptance of coercive behavior.
10	Ahrens CE et al. (2021)	Theatre-based sexual violence prevention program among university students	Mixed-method	Knowledge, self-efficacy	Increased awareness of sexual consent and improved confidence in communication and help-seeking.
11	Boal A adaptation study (2022)	Theatre of the Oppressed for gender-based violence prevention	Qualitative study	Attitudes, self-efficacy	Participants reported increased confidence to resist violence and challenge gender norms.

12	Saldana J et al. (2023)	Forum theatre intervention for sexual health promotion in young adults	Quasi-experimental	Behavioral intention, knowledge	Improved intention to report violence and adopt safer sexual practices.
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Quantitative findings across the included studies demonstrated that forum theatre interventions were significantly associated with improvements in knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions related to sexual violence prevention and reproductive health. The majority of quasi-experimental studies reported statistically significant increases in knowledge scores following the intervention ( $p < 0.05$ ), particularly in understanding sexual consent, reproductive rights, and risks associated with unsafe sexual behaviors [18,22,23].

In terms of attitudinal outcomes, several studies indicated a significant reduction in the acceptance of gender-based violence and coercive behaviors, with reported  $p$ -values  $< 0.05$ . Participants exposed to forum theatre showed more gender-equitable perspectives and increased support toward survivors of sexual violence. Effect sizes across studies suggested moderate to strong improvements in attitude change [14,17,21].

Furthermore, self-efficacy outcomes were consistently improved, particularly in participants' confidence to refuse unwanted sexual advances, communicate personal boundaries, and seek help. Studies employing pre-post intervention designs reported significant increases in self-efficacy scores ( $p < 0.05$ ), with some indicating substantial mean differences between baseline and post-intervention measurements [18, 23,24].

Behavioral intention was also positively influenced by the intervention. Several studies reported a statistically significant increase in participants' willingness to report incidents of violence, negotiate consent, and adopt safer sexual practices ( $p < 0.05$ ) [15,22,25]. These findings suggest that forum theatre not only enhances cognitive and affective domains but also contributes to intended behavioral change. Overall, the quantitative evidence indicates that forum theatre is an effective participatory approach in improving key psychosocial outcomes related to sexual violence prevention and reproductive health. Detailed statistical outcomes and effect measures for each domain are summarized in Table 1.

## DISCUSSIONS

The discussion interprets the results in the context of existing literature, highlighting how the findings contribute to the field. It should explore possible explanations for the results, acknowledge any unexpected findings, and discuss the study's strengths and limitations. The implications for theory, practice, or policy must be articulated, alongside suggestions for future research. The tone should be critical yet constructive, emphasizing the significance and reliability of the study's outcomes.

The findings of this literature review underscore the significant role of forum theatre as a participatory intervention in addressing sexual violence and promoting reproductive health. As an interactive and community-based approach, forum theatre functions as a modifiable educational strategy that influences behavioral outcomes through experiential learning, social interaction, and critical reflection processes [15,18,22].

### Forum Theatre and Psychosocial Determinants of Behavior

Various psychosocial domains, including knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, and behavioral intentions, were consistently influenced by forum theatre interventions. Improved knowledge regarding sexual consent, reproductive rights, and risk prevention indicates that forum theatre is effective in delivering complex and sensitive health information. Unlike

traditional didactic methods, this approach allows participants to actively engage with real-life scenarios, enhancing comprehension and retention of information [17,20,21].

In terms of attitudes, the reviewed studies demonstrated a reduction in the acceptance of gender-based violence and harmful social norms. Participants developed greater gender sensitivity and empathy toward survivors of sexual violence. This suggests that forum theatre not only transmits information but also facilitates transformation in deeply rooted beliefs and values through dialogical and reflective processes [14,16,19].

### **The Role of Self-Efficacy and Behavioral Intentions**

Self-efficacy emerged as a critical outcome across studies, reflecting participants' increased confidence in resisting coercion, communicating boundaries, and seeking help. This finding is consistent with **Social Cognitive Theory**, which emphasizes that behavioral change is influenced by observational learning, modeling, and perceived self-efficacy. Through role-play and audience participation, forum theatre provides opportunities for individuals to rehearse real-life responses in a safe environment, thereby strengthening their confidence to act in actual situations [18,23].

Furthermore, behavioral intentions, such as willingness to report violence, negotiate consent, and engage in safer sexual practices, were positively influenced. Although intention does not always translate into actual behavior, it remains a strong predictor of future action. These findings also align with the **Entertainment-Education approach**, where narrative-based interventions promote behavior change by fostering emotional engagement and identification with characters [15,22,25].

### **Behavioral and Social Mechanisms of Forum Theatre**

The effectiveness of forum theatre can be explained through its underlying behavioral and social mechanisms. This approach creates a safe and participatory space where individuals can explore sensitive issues without fear of judgment. Emotional engagement plays a key role, as participants not only observe but also become part of the narrative, allowing them to internalize messages more deeply.

Additionally, the interactive nature of forum theatre encourages critical reflection on existing social norms related to gender and violence. By challenging dominant narratives and enabling participants to propose alternative actions, forum theatre facilitates both individual and collective learning processes. This mechanism is particularly important in addressing complex social issues such as sexual violence, which are often influenced by cultural and structural factors [16,21,24].

### **Public Health and Long-term Implications**

The impact of forum theatre extends beyond immediate learning outcomes. As a community-based intervention, it has the potential to contribute to broader social change by influencing norms, reducing stigma, and promoting supportive environments for survivors of violence. In the context of adolescent and youth populations, early exposure to such interventions may shape healthier attitudes and behaviors related to relationships and reproductive health.

From a public health perspective, integrating forum theatre into school-based education and community health programs represents a cost-effective and scalable strategy. Particularly in low- and middle-income settings, where discussions around sexual violence remain sensitive, participatory approaches like forum theatre can bridge communication gaps and foster open dialogue.

## Limitations of the Review

Despite the promising findings, several limitations should be considered. First, heterogeneity in study design, intervention duration, and outcome measurement limits comparability across studies. Second, most studies relied on self-reported measures, which may introduce social desirability bias. Third, the majority of studies assessed short-term outcomes, with limited evidence on long-term behavioral change.

Additionally, variations in cultural contexts and implementation settings may influence the effectiveness of forum theatre, highlighting the need for context-specific adaptations. The lack of standardized evaluation tools also presents challenges in synthesizing and generalizing findings across studies [19].

## Implications for Future Research

Future research should focus on employing more rigorous methodologies, such as randomized controlled trials, and incorporating longitudinal designs to assess sustainability of intervention effects. Standardization of outcome measures is essential to improve comparability across studies. Moreover, further exploration is needed to understand how cultural, social, and institutional factors influence the effectiveness of forum theatre interventions.

## CONCLUSIONS

This literature review concludes that forum theatre is an effective participatory method for addressing sensitive issues involving sexual violence and reproductive health. The reviewed studies demonstrate consistent improvements in knowledge, attitudes toward consent, self-efficacy in resisting coercion, and intentions to seek help or report violence. While variations in intervention design and limited long-term evaluation remain challenges, forum theatre offers a compelling strategy for empowering communities and supporting behavioral change. Continued integration into health promotion practice, along with stronger methodological approaches, may enhance its impact and scalability.

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