



## Stories/storytelling for women's empowerment/empowering stories



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### SYNOPSIS

The aim of this paper is to introduce and analyze the “Stories/Storytelling for Change” Project by the “I am the Story” Group that was held under the auspices of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Project. The paper describes the methodologies used in holding two re/writing workshops using social and anthropological research as raw material for the writing. Another aim of this methodology paper is to propose that creative writing and storytelling can be effectively used as advocacy tools in gender training workshops. Works of art are maintained to help participants in gender training workshops to acquire gender knowledge and to write gender sensitive stories in the most subtle of ways. The subtlety of a good work of art is claimed to help feminist issues to sink in an effective way as it helps suspend participants' resistance to new ideas about gender stereotyping and traditional gender roles that oppress both men and women in the Egyptian society. One of the main aims of the paper is also to demonstrate how storytelling performances including the stories written in the workshops can help disseminate discussions and revisions of gender issues to wider audiences who would not know about these issues in other different ways.

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*Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.*

[Robert McKee]

The aim of this paper is to present storytelling as methodology in the Stories/Storytelling for Change Project of the “I Am the Story” (*Ana el-Hekaya*) Group. The project is based on using creative stories for gender education and enhancing awareness of the gender biases, inequalities and normative patterns in gender roles in the Egyptian society. The main objective of the project is to bring about change in the gender status quo in the Egyptian society, thus empowering both the participants in the project and women in the whole society at large. The method used to achieve this objective is rendering women's personal narratives from case studies in sociological and anthropological research into fictional stories with a feminist perspective through a process of rewriting of those personal narratives. The new stories, in their turn, are adapted to storytelling in storytelling performances. The choice of story/storytelling as the medium of creating new gender consciousness is attributed to the fact that stories are a fundamental component of the human

mind throughout the ages which facilitates the process of gender education of people with different experiences and backgrounds (Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007). Meanwhile, “[t]hrough empathetic engagement, stories set the stage for affecting change, for imagining otherwise... As we create new narratives we situate ourselves as responsive moral agents, enabling new ways of behaving in line with social justice goals” (Bell, 2010). The use of stories in instruction on gender issues makes use also of the power of story/storytelling which provides the subtlety needed for real, deep levels of education and subsequent empowerment to take place. As Renard B. Harris rightly observes: “Factual pedagogy can affect students, but stories do it better” (112). According to Harris, “because fictional stories tend to focus on affective meaning and because education should be comprehensive, stories should be combined with cognitive meaning in the classroom” (112). In their valuable empirical study of the use of story and storytelling in the process of knowledge management and knowledge sharing entitled, “Once upon a time in Africa: a case study of Storytelling for Knowledge Sharing,” Peter K.J. Tobin & Synman, 2008 Synman prove that storytelling is one of the most effective methods to enhance the sharing of knowledge

(*passim*). Similarly, in the “I Am the Story” storytelling project, acquiring the cognitive is not the ultimate goal. The project aims at taking the cognitive meaning a step further for participants to be active in their own education and the education of others through the stories they produce. The project is based on the belief that storytelling is subversive in its nature, not only pedagogical (Brune, 2002; Josephs, 2008). Writing a gender-sensitive fictional story is often indicative of the occurrence of subversion of concepts that would, in turn, contribute to the effectuation of change on the part of the readers and audiences of these new stories. The change of normative inequalities and biases would in turn mean the empowerment of the participants involved in writing the new stories that combat those inequalities and of their audiences as well.

The idea of using personal narratives as raw material in gender workshops of the Stories/Storytelling for Change Project has stemmed from a desire to engage with the women interviewed in social science research in a more profound way that would read between the lines of their narratives in response to the interviewer's questions. Another aim is to humanize the women in the personal narratives who are usually dealt with as case studies in qualitative research or mere numbers in the statistics of quantitative research. Fortunately though, the interviews used for the Stories/Storytelling for Change Project are all from pieces of research by feminist scholars whose work deals with gender issues such as family laws, women's work and development in women's status throughout the lives of three generations of women. The interviews also come from qualitative pieces of research with long and detailed interviews that give enough material for the rewriting. The project was part of the Middle Eastern and African Hub of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Project. Within the framework of the Pathways Project; two three day re/writing workshops were conducted on the personal narratives and a storytelling performance was held.

### **Methodology of the “I Am the Story” Stories/Storytelling for Change Project**

#### *The trainers*

The trainers are three feminist activists who were trained in the field of literary criticism and feminist writing. The three trainers are all university professors with PhDs on literature. They are also published fiction writers. In addition to the above, the three of them joined the Women and Memory Forum (an Egyptian non-governmental organization whose main objective is the rewriting of history from a feminist perspective's) Said the Female Storyteller Project 1998–2009. During those years they joined regular monthly workshops devoted to the rewriting of folk stories and stories from the *One Thousand and One Nights* from a feminist perspective. Meanwhile, the three trainers participated in several storytelling performances where they told their own stories and stories of other members of Said the Female Storyteller Project. They thus acquired expertise in creative writing, literary criticism and storytelling, both as writers and as performers of stories.

#### *Choice of participants*

An announcement is made as widely as possible through the social media (mainly facebook and blogs that have to do with creative writing) for the choice of participants. Conditions for participation include belonging to a specific age group (18–35). The Egyptian culture, and most of the Arab countries, enjoy great respect for old age, the older the people, the wiser and more knowledgeable they are believed to be. Young people are taught since their early childhood not to argue with older people but rather listen carefully to what they say and try to learn from them. Obviously, that is not always the case. Only recently young people have learnt to examine such values as blind obedience of elders; the result was a revolution that led to the fall of a corrupt regime and the ouster of a tyrant. Yet, it is still intimidating for some young people to differ with their elders. Hence is the insistence on including this age condition as this particular project is about the change of concepts and opening up to allow for this. This has necessitated creating a safe haven for participants to express their views without fear of being negatively judged.

Another very important condition has to do with the ability to write creatively. The “Storytelling for Change” re/writing workshops are not creative writing workshops; that is the workshops are not supposed to teach participants to write creatively. Applicants to the workshops are asked to present specimen of their writings, preferably published pieces. A meticulous process of screening by the trainers is then conducted to choose the most creative of the applying writers. The main focus of the screening is usually artistic in the sense that the best fifteen writers are chosen, regardless of their feminist views or their gender. The limitation of numbers is based mainly on the limitation of time. The three days would not allow for a larger number of participants to get the attention needed and to have an equal share of the discussion.

The re/writing workshops are also gender training ones where participants are trained to use their creative writing abilities to write gender sensitive stories using materials from social and anthropological research. No prior knowledge of gender issues is needed for them to attend the workshops. Exposure to gender issues and feminist views usually varies from one participant to the other but this variation has proven to enrich the discussions. The presence of a few anti-feminist participants has often encouraged some otherwise silent participants to voice their views.

#### *Gender sensitizing for empowerment between the pedagogical and the creative*

The first day of the first three day re/writing workshop is devoted to the pedagogical part of the project. The pedagogical, however, is implemented through the creative as well. Participants are exposed to different literary and visual artistic materials that represent different gender stereotypes and gender power relations. After being introduced to some gender theories that have to do mainly with stereotyping and power relations, participants start criticizing the works they read and watch from a gender sensitive perspective using the tools they learn in the theoretical part. The teaching methodology is participant-centered in the sense that lecturing

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