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“The teacher who assisted me in recording my story was also my witness during our session, and she created a container of safety for me. I remember what it felt like to walk out of the recording room that day. I felt different, like I’d found some resolution to something I never thought I’d get resolution from. My story in my own voice. Wow, my experience will be taken seriously now; I’ll finally be heard.” — Silence Speaks workshop participant

Several qualitative studies of Silence Speaks projects have revealed the positive impacts on workshop participants of sharing personal stories. These include improved self-expression, self-efficacy, and agency; technology and literacy skills development; and increased interest in getting involved with education and advocacy work to address social issues. First, unpublished research [1] involving interviews with a small number of Silence Speaks workshop participants identified five core themes:

1. The workshop process provided a sense of connection, support, and validation.
2. Creating a digital story offered an opportunity for new forms of self-expression leading to new and meaningful insights.
3. Participants felt able to challenge the silencing effect their experiences of violence had had on them, which allowed them to claim or reclaim aspects of their selves.
4. The process engendered feelings of pride and satisfaction.
5. Sharing their completed digital stories with others led participants to feel a sense of social agency whereby they believed their digital stories impacted or had the potential to impact viewers.

“For me, it is important to know that spaces are being created for survivors of violence to express their experiences. I loved the fact that the space is one that enables participants to feel safe and

supported. I also like the marriage of teaching and learning new skills while sharing experiences of violence.” — Silence Speaks workshop participant

“I loved the story sharing circle the best . . . for me, it was the first time I was ever sharing my story in a supportive environment with other survivors and women. I am so proud of my work, and I can’t tell you how good that makes me feel.” — Silence Speaks workshop participant

Secondly, a qualitative research project [2] focused on two pilot workshops held as part of [our ongoing collaboration with Sonke Gender Justice Network](#) in South Africa showed many positive effects on the women and men who created stories. Analysis of focus groups and interviews with participants indicated that the workshop increased participants’ access to and comfort level with technology tools, which are not often readily available to low-income South Africans. The study also found that the workshops helped participants confront their traumatic experiences, find a sense of ownership over these experiences, and share their experiences with others, through creating stories.

Finally, an evaluation of [our partnership with the GOJoven program](#) of Public Health Institute demonstrated a wide range of positive effects on workshop participants. Participants reported an enhanced ability to communicate personal narratives, reflect upon these narratives, and contextualize and discuss issues of sexual health. These discussions led participants to identify key issues – such as the lack of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive services and sex education – for inclusion in their action plans for promoting adolescent sexual health and rights. Participants also reported that publicly sharing their stories helped them recognize the power that personal narratives can have in supporting responsible decision-making among youth.

“. . .my participation in the workshop has changed, for the better, the core of who I am, because it has truly demonstrated [the] impact of not having proper SRH (sexual and reproductive health) education as a teenager.” — Silence Speaks workshop participant, GOJoven partnership

Impact on Story Viewers

Limited resources and a lack of understanding among partners and funders about the crucial need to document specific outcomes of watching or listening to stories mean that we have thus

far been unable to conduct a large-scale study of how Silence Speaks stories can provide viewers with valuable information, function as skill-building tools, promote dialogue and focused action for justice, or influence decision makers and leaders to introduce, enact, or enforce laws and policies related to gender equality, health, and human rights. Three small-scale studies of our work do provide a glimpse into what is possible.

First, several Silence Speaks stories were used in a study [3] assessing viewer impact in a higher education setting. A majority of participating individuals who watched the stories reported strong emotional responses, learned new information, and expressed intent to take an action in relation to women's rights. Many respondents also reported a strong desire to help meet local community needs and learn more about global human rights. Some also expressed an interest in how digital stories can inspire activism. One participant said, "Stories (can) be used for advocacy purposes, as they are a very powerful means of influencing and passing on the messages." Another said, "Watching these stories only strengthens my resolve to work to further human rights in any way I can, whether it's for women's empowerment, or human rights education, or something else."

Second, as part of the GOJoven evaluation discussed above, GOJoven workshop participants field-tested selected stories with community-based audiences in Latin America. When asked about the impact these stories had on their understanding of and support for adolescent sexual and reproductive health, audience members stated that the stories were highly engaging, resonating, and motivating, due to their honesty. The GOJoven presenters reported witnessing decreased resistance to discussing sexual and reproductive health issues, among story viewers, and noticed changed attitudes among viewers about controversial topics such as sex education in schools. Sharing stories also helped the GOJoven presenters better understand youth audience members, who reported being able to identify with the stories and as a result feeling more comfortable talking about their personal concerns and situations.

Third, as part of a pilot project designed to explore the educational value of stories created by youth, [4] Sonke Gender Justice brought a selection of stories to several schools in Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. Educational sessions with students proved successful in encouraging them to speak out about health issues, and launched community conversations about topics like sexual assault, sexual identity, and HIV and AIDS. The classroom discussions, which were held

after students viewed stories, helped teachers identify gaps in the curriculum and advocate for needed youth services and health provider and law enforcement interventions for the local community. [Read about our youth-focused work with Sonke](#), in rural South Africa.

“I’ve learned a lot of things. They (the stories) have given me the strength, courage of saying what I feel for once, you know? Without people setting me back. They made me feel very emotional. I don’t know how . . . but they’ve brought courage and determination in me.” — Youth viewer of Sonke Gender Justice – Silence Speaks stories, South Africa

Finally, [our work with Sonke Gender Justice](#) inspired us to create a unique model of the potential impacts of storytelling through participatory media, which describes change at a number of levels:

Personal Reflection and Growth

While change is an inevitable part of being human, people often lack opportunities to share and bear witness to stories of their own struggles and joys, or to listen to those of others. Silence Speaks workshops offer a safe, supportive environment in which participants of all ages and from all walks of life can explore their histories and reflect on how they got to where they are. Important work in psychology has documented the significant mental health benefits of sharing personal memories in a group setting and writing autobiography, both of which are key aspects of our processes (see, for example, Herman, 1992; Pennebaker, 1997). By making stories, Silence Speaks participants connect deeply with themselves and with others, thereby accessing the hope and intimacy that trauma and rights violations often obscure.

Education, Training, and Awareness

Beyond the education that happens in the context of a Silence Speaks workshop (which can build language and technology literacy skills among participants, provide them with critical health and human rights information, and cultivate their leadership and public speaking abilities), personal stories are immensely useful tools for learning and awareness. Silence Speaks stories stand out for their directness of emotional expression. We work closely with workshop participants to ensure that the social and political determinants of individual “experience” are brought out in stories. Facts and timelines and third-person perspectives by “experts” can be useful in describing an issue or problem, but personal stories, when properly contextualized, can

bring to life the realities of how individual people experience that issue or problem, day to day. When audience members see and hear a story that addresses silenced or stigmatized topics, their conception of what can and can't be said or done shifts, and this is where behavior and social norm change begins.

Community and Movement Building

Collective action begins with individual action, as people make connections between their own lives and the lives of others (Freire, 1970). Silence Speaks workshops offer wonderful opportunities to examine experiences and issues across chasms of difference – be they cultural, linguistic, political, racial, gendered, age-related, etc. As participants allow themselves to be vulnerable in sharing their own stories, they gain insight into perspectives and emotions they may not previously have considered or felt, as well as a sense of purpose for taking action. In this way, our workshops build solidarity across groups and encourage leadership and civic engagement. Viewers of digital stories have the chance to consider how they may be affected by or implicated in a particular issue. With careful facilitation, community screenings can generate deep and strategic discussion about systemic inequalities and function as an opportunity to map out strategies for how audience members can mobilize and take action for justice. This work can be supported by broadcasting stories on local radio and pushing them out through available mobile and social media tools, to reinforce what people have seen and heard at screening events.

Policy Advocacy and Enforcement

In an ideal world, every-day people would have ample opportunity to express their political concerns and social needs, and their voices would directly inform public policy debates. Unfortunately, abstract data and special interests all too often dominate. Stories created in Silence Speaks workshops can bring the concerns of those who are typically overlooked into the policy arena. Their compact length and ability to zero in on important issues make them ideal for educating and influencing leaders and decision makers in government and other institutions. Health, gender equity, and human rights politics are essential, but unless the public is educated about such policies and those responsible are trained on how to enforce them and held to account when they do not, they accomplish little. Silence Speaks stories are useful as a key component of public awareness raising and training efforts to support responsible implementation and enforcement of policies that have already been adopted.

Research and Evaluation

Whether in an academic or community context, Silence Speaks storytelling and participatory media methods can be used to assess and document local needs and problems or to evaluate whether or not those needs and problems are being addressed by existing programs and services. We have worked with our partners to hold workshops as a form of community-based participatory research, to support community members in gathering qualitative evidence about issues of concern or local strengths and capacities that are being overlooked. We have also collaborated with partners to gather stories documenting important moments along the way as a project unfolds, or offer a reflective space where people can discuss what is working and what might be done differently. And finally, our numerous academic partners are exploring how best to evaluate the impact of workshops and story screenings, on storytellers and audiences.

References

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Footnotes

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- [2] Tolly, K. (2007) *Digital stories as tools for change: a study of the dynamics of technology use in social change and activism*. Unpublished master’s thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.
- [3] Jones, L. (2013) *Measuring the impact of women’s digital stories in human rights education: a case study of silence speaks digital stories*. Unpublished master’s thesis, York University, U.K.
- [4] Hill, A. and Reed, A. (2010) “Don’t Keep It To Yourself!”: *digital storytelling with South African youth*. Seminar.Net International Journal of Media, Technology, and Online Learning, Vol. 6, Issue 2.