

# EMPOWERING WOMEN SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

*Violence against women in its varying forms is a nationwide issue in Pakistan (Sajid, Khan, & Farid, 2010) perpetuated due to unequal power relations between men and women (Coomaraswamy, 2005; Babur, 2007). A sustaining hope for the attenuation of this issue is the rapid increase in reports of gender based violence by the mass media to the law enforcing agencies (Dawn News, 2011). However, women survivors of violence must be empowered themselves to share their voices using digital means. Focusing on empowering Pakistani women survivors of violence to voice their position on the faced violence incidents, Subh-e-Nau project was executed. This paper presents the digital stories developed by the women survivors of violence during this project. Using the gendered outcome mapping framework (Shams et al, 2010), for observing the changes in their behavior through this intervention, two major behavior transformations were discerned. Firstly, they improved their self confidence and motivation by learning to use ICT, and secondly, they had a sense of fulfillment by learning a powerful medium to express themselves more strongly on global levels.*

**KEY WORDS:** gender, information and communication technologies, empowerment, storytelling and conscientization

## INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal structures and values are deeply entrenched in South Asian societies that set forth a number of gender issues keeping women subordinated and marginalized in decision-making processes and in other forms of social engagements. Women's secondary status is further reinforced by certain governmental policies that fail to acknowledge women's rights and access to services and opportunities as compared to men (UNIFEM, 2005). This gender inequality in

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power relations is deemed as one of the root causes of violence against women (UNFPA-AFPPD, 2003). Violence against women (VAW) is defined as *“any act of gender-based violence that results, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”* Thus, VAW refers to violent acts that are *“primarily or exclusively committed against women”* (United Nations, 1993). According to the World Health Organization (2009),

Violence against women differs in its forms, it includes sexual, physical, or emotional abuse by an intimate partner; physical or sexual abuse by family members or others; sexual harassment and abuse by authority figures (such as teachers, police officers or employers); trafficking for forced labor or sex; and such traditional practices as forced or child marriages, dowry-related violence; and honor killings, when women are murdered in the name of family honor. Systematic sexual abuse in conflict situations is another form of violence against women.

World Bank (1993) report indicates that one in three women across the world has suffered violence in her lifetime. She has been beaten up, raped, assaulted, trafficked, harassed or forced to submit to harmful practices. Very often, the abuser is a member of the woman’s own family or someone known to her. This leaves the victimized women in an atmosphere of fear, and most of the times their lives are guaranteed only in exchange for obedience to social norms and traditions (Manderson & Bennett, 2003). Because of this fear and sense of being inferior, imposed by the traditional thoughts of male dominated society, women are suffering immensely especially in their homes (Murthy & Smith, 2010). According to the report of Commission of Inquiry for Women (1997), *“Among the most lethal forces which impact women’s dignity and security are customary practices which aim at preserving female subjugation. Often defended and sanctified as cultural traditions, they are usually fiercely defended by those who practice*

*them*". Violence against women is being accepted as social norm and cultural practice in Pakistan. Due to this practice among the masses, most of the incidents of violence against women remain underreported (Andersson et al., 2010)

With the advent of electronic media, cases of violence against women are now being highlighted. Many unreported cases have been explored and people have started reporting honor killing, work place harassment and rape cases which were earlier suppressed due to social and cultural pressures. According to Parveen (2010), 7571 cases of violence against women in Pakistan were reported in 2008 and this number increased to 8548 in 2009.

Pakistani government has identified violence against women as one of the prime issues to be addressed immediately and specific measures are being taken to ensure its complete eradication. The National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) was promulgated to promote women's participation in all activities of life while declaring zero tolerance towards violence against women and girls. Sexual harassment at the workplace bill (2010) was passed and approved to empower women to work more autonomously and contribute to the country's economy. Honour killing (*karo kari*) of women has now been recognized as premeditated murder and the convict is penalized under Section 302 of Pakistan Penal Code.

Although, efforts are underway by both governmental and non-governmental sectors to eliminate violence against women from society, innovative strategies and approaches are still required to eradicate this issue at the grassroots level by directly empowering the victims to defend themselves completely. Empowerment in this context would thus embody the following interpretation.

## DEFINING EMPOWERMENT

Williams, Seed, and Mwau (1994) refer to ‘power’ as the root of the empowerment. Power in such a context can operate in a number of different ways:

- a. Power over a process of domination/subordination. This power is based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation, it requires constant vigilance to maintain, and it invites active and passive resistance.
- b. Power to holding decision-making authority. This power relates the ability to solve problems.
- c. Power with organizing people for a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals
- d. Power within a process of gaining self confidence, self awareness and assertiveness. This power relates to how individuals can recognize their own selves by analyzing their experience.

As per the above discussion, at the grassroots level two factors are significant for empowerment; *power with* or the organization of people for a common objective in achieving collective goals and *power within* or the power for self analysis through personal experiences to gain increased self confidence. Following the above contextualization, empowerment of women survivors of violence is undertaken as a continuous process of organization by providing opportunities to share experiences with other survivors to gain self confidence. Empowerment of women survivors of violence is also interpreted as having access to means, specifically digital platform for sharing their experiences globally, to bring awareness on violence against women among masses.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

VAW has been recognized as a development issue (Pickup, Williams, & Sweetman, 2001) and ICTs as tools to be used effectively by women survivors of violence to redress this issue (Macueve, Mandlate, Ginger, Gaster, & Macomb, 2009). Awareness raising through development of digital stories is a powerful medium for voicing one's experiences and thoughts nationally as well as globally (Berthold, Miller, & Miller, 2009). Digital storytelling is the emerging practice of using digital devices to create media-rich stories using images, music, narrative, and voice together. Such an amalgamation presents a vivid characterization of events, situations and feelings. Digital stories have been recognized as a medium to share personal experiences that also thrust a far reaching effect on its viewers (Yuksel, Robin, & McNeil, 2011). Further, digital storytelling process has also been stated as a powerful therapeutic, healing, resilience building and resilience enhancing tool. Sometimes, digital stories are also used as a tool for political activism due to its strength to connect personal stories with the broader public issues that a community faces (Sanchez, 2011).

In recent times, digital storytelling has emerged as an established methodology for awareness-raising because of the relatively low cost of digital devices and the ease of learning to create digital stories. In this context, digital stories are being widely used to trigger action and change around incidents of gender based violence as well (Hill, 2008). Silence speaks ([www.silencespeaks.org](http://www.silencespeaks.org)) is one of the pivotal projects initiated for women survivors of violence in Africa. The project aimed to support survivors of violence in sharing their own stories through short videos and presenting these videos in training, community organizing, and policy advocacy setting. Voice Beyond Walls has been another significant initiative of training refugee camp youngsters on digital storytelling (Sawhney, 2009). Similarly in Pakistan, Sub-e-Nau ([www.cle.org.pk/subhenau](http://www.cle.org.pk/subhenau)) project was conceived and conducted to train Pakistani women

survivors of violence to use ICTs (computer, internet and email) generally and digital storytelling particularly to develop their own digital story in order to voice their life incidents of violence.

## **RATIONALE OF CURRENT STUDY**

This study aims to investigate the efficacy of digital storytelling as a medium of self expression for women survivors of violence. In addition, following study also seeks to capture the transformation in the behaviors of women survivors of violence and the skills which they acquired through digital storytelling process.

## **SUBH-E-NAU PROJECT**

Subh-e-Nau was a joint venture of the Center for Language Engineering (CLE), and All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), Punjab. The project envisioned that by learning to develop digital stories and the basic use of Internet,

Pakistani women, specifically women survivors of violence would share their stories across the globe through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). By using these digital mediums, they would actively communicate amongst themselves and with lawyers to attain social and legal justice. Through these digital platforms, Pakistani women at grassroots level would be able to create a global influence to counter violence against women (Subh-e-Nau, 2011).

Ten women survivors of violence have been selected for this project through APWA's legal aid cell as they were getting help in their litigation cases through this platform. To train these women survivors of violence on digital story development, a customized training was organized at APWA's regional office from 4th to 20th April 2011. This three week long training was conducted by one tutor and two facilitators. As most of the training participants were the sole bread earners for their family, thus the training was scheduled for only three days a week. In

addition, the training timings were also consulted with the participants beforehand in order to ensure their participation and accommodate their work schedules. Training team took following actions to ensure participation of women survivors of violence and success of the training program:

- i. Focus was more on audio visual learning methods, supplemented by written to strengthen the training session. In this context, sample digital stories were developed while few digital stories were localized for the participants to make familiar with this technique.
- ii. Support was given in terms of facilitation to each participant in story development and script writing. Technical assistance was also given to the participants in building their ICTs competency.
- iii. Training duration was planned 3 to 4 hours per day to make this program fruitful for participants. To mitigate more drop-offs from program, a daily honorarium was provided to the women on weekly basis.
- iv. Lecture was developed in local language after considering educational level and age of the participants. More emphasis was on to enable the participants for performing the tasks that were assigned to them.
- v. Ice breaker activities like post card making and computer game competition were conducted for the brainstorming and creating their interest motivation for participation in workshop.
- vi. Psychologists were inducted in the workshop for assessment of participants' self confidence and mental health.

- vii. Website of Subh- e-Nau project was developed to encourage women survivors of violence for developing digital stories and making their voices heard.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In Subh-e-Nau project, Gendered Outcome Mapping Framework, an adaptation of the Outcome Mapping, was used for the designing, planning, monitoring and evaluation of this project. This frame work is specifically designed to capture changes in behavior of project beneficiaries (Shams et al, 2010). This framework allows to capture changes in project beneficiaries by developing an outcome challenge. Following outcome challenge, the intended change which project team wishes to see in project beneficiaries, was targeted for women survivors of violence to see women survivors of violence using ICTs and developing their stories, presenting their survival stories by using creative and innovative mediums, communicating and interacting with other women survivors of violence, and learning to use online support network created through Subh-e-Nau project.

To assess this outcome challenge among women survivors of violence, their daily performance was monitored. Women survivors of violence were trained for basic ICT skills through this training program, and their ICT skills were assessed through various strategies such as turning computer on and off, managing files, working on word processor, images and graphics etc. The practice of these ICT skills was also monitored by seeing their usage in developing their story illustrations, searching images through internet, communicating via e-mail, editing their audio files and making their digital story in movie maker. Self confidence and mental health of each participant was evaluated by trained psychologists before and after project execution by using a standard scientific

scale termed as Mental Status Examination (MSE), a clinical assessment technique (Trzepacz & Baker, 1993) developed to specifically assess self confidence and mental health.

## **VOICES OF THE WOMEN SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE**

The following section discusses four digital stories created by the participating women survivors of violence during the digital storytelling workshop. Through the creation of the digital story, the participants narrated the incidents of gender based violence they had faced in their life and described their struggle to overcome the situation.

After each narrative, the case studies further touches upon two significant outcomes of the digital storytelling process. Firstly they present the increased self confidence of the participants by acquiring new ICT skill. Secondly they present the behavioral transformation observed through psychological assessment of the participants' mental health prior to and after the digital story telling workshop endorsing that digital storytelling process has been a therapeutic and resilience building exercise.

### **STORY 1: WAS IT MY ILL-FATE OR GOOD FORTUNE?**

This story presents the persistent struggle of a young woman in pursuit of choosing nursing as her professional career. Her decision to become a nurse became a constant source of criticism from relatives and community members who did not consider nursing as a respectable profession. She describes that even her childhood engagement got dissolved when she chose to become a nurse because her future in-laws did not approve of her profession. Thus she was repeatedly abused by her family and friends because of her profession. However, she remained determined to continue her job with the same motivation.

With hand drawn images, she aptly presents her life's incidents of domestic violence after marriage, in which she was economically and emotionally exploited by her husband for monetary gains as she was the earning hand. There she decided to divorce her husband and start afresh. Her family refused to stand by this decision and to accommodate her in her parent's house. At that point in time, she realized that the society and even family will continue to suppress her if she did not stand up to build her own career.



Figure 1: Digital Story "Was it My Ill-fate or Good Fortune?"

Her story continues to present her struggle in fighting against workplace harassment upon finding a new job. She highlighted that professional women especially those divorced, become more vulnerable to such forms of harassment from their colleagues than others. However, even after being faced with a number of social issues, she concludes her story and her life's struggle in a very positive note. In her story, she presents that her life's struggle bore fruit for her, and by attaining economic empowerment through her professional excellence as a practicing nurse she was able to fulfill her dreams of buying a shelter for herself and her parents and be able to live a happy and satisfied life.

Regarding ICT skill enhancement, through this workshop, the creator of the story learnt to browse the internet and search audio and visual content related to her story. She learnt to create

pictures using open source drawing editor and to type in the local language for developing her story script. She also used the basic computer operations, e.g. creating folder, opening, closing, creating and saving a file. This participant also outshined others by even learning to edit her story using the movie editor. On the first day of the workshop, psychological assessment conducted by psychologists assessed her mental health as depressed and feeling anxiety. However on the last day of this workshop, the same psychological assessment reported that she was feeling happy and hopeful for the future life.

## STORY 2: THORNY RELATIONSHIP

Economic pressure faced by parents of large families is a significant factor in perpetuating gender based violence on daughters in most low income households. For women, physical appearance especially becomes the root cause of discrimination and violence on daughters in a family. The story creator of the digital story *thorny relationship* used digital storytelling to highlight the lifelong discrimination and misery that she faced by not have been bestowed with good looks.



Figure 2: Digital Story “Thorny Relationship”

Through her digital story, she presented her childhood memories of verbal abuse by her own mother, who used to discredit her among other siblings because she did not have fair

complexion and was always apprehensive that she may not be able to get a marriage proposal. Due to this, her wishes regarding getting education, professional growth or even those of personal gratification through dressing up and looking good was never fulfilled in her parent's house. She was then hurriedly married off to an elderly man of her father's age.

Through hand drawn pictures, the story creator of *Thorny relationship* showed that her misery continued even in her husband's house. Her husband never fulfilled financial obligations of his wife and the family. She scripted that "Within the same house we used to live as strangers." Maltreatment by husbands is another type of gender based violence that can very often be witnessed in our society. The story creator significantly highlighted this issue in her story. Daughters are strongly advised *to live in husband's house till death* when they are getting married. This digital story shows that women are advised to sacrifice their life for the sake of keeping up with their husbands, to avoid the stigma of being a divorcee and a single parent of their children. Thus the story presents a young woman's continuous struggle to give a better future to her children more importantly to her daughters. She states, " *I have been doing, morning, evening and night shifts to raise my family.*" The message she gives out at the end is to give happiness to the daughters before they are married, and not to rely on the life after marriage for the fulfillment of her children's wishes.

Before attending the digital storytelling workshop, the story creator had never used computer. However after completing this workshop, she was able to perform general functions of computer including internet browsing and email communication. On the first day of the workshop, the psychological assessment conducted by psychologists reported that the creator was sorrowful about her past miseries and remembered her sufferings. She had no enjoyable movement in her life and remained depressed. While on the last day of this workshop, the same

psychological assessment indicated that psychologists had identified positive attitude in her. According to her, the workshop had given her a new motivation for living life and she was determined to learn computer thoroughly and also to send her children for computer training. She was happy and hopeful for her future life.

### STORY 3: MY HOPE

Early age marriage is quite widespread in Pakistani society. In this story, the story creator has highlighted the issue of early age marriage and its adverse consequences for the young girls. She narrates that she was married at the age of fifteen. After marriage, her in-laws and her husband would not give her any financial assistance to fulfill her expenses. Domestic violence in shape of quarrelling and physical abuse was the order of the day. The negligence and discrimination continued even after she gave birth to a daughter. Because she was very young she was unable to balance her family life.

Accusing women of any unwanted happening in the family is another form of domestic violence inflicted on women. Within her digital story, the participant discusses that she was subjected to physical torture, and accused of murdering her two year old daughter, who died due to the negligence of the hospital staff. After this incident the story creator was thrown out of her house. In her digital story, the selection of colorless images to present her life story vividly portrays the feelings of a married woman living a colorless life at her parents' home through this digital story.



Figure 3: Digital Story “My Hope”

Even after bearing all the harsh experiences, her digital story still presents her wish to continue her married life by ignoring all previous memories of the violent incidents faced at her in-laws house. Her story concludes on a happy note that as she has started to learn computer through this workshop therefore she is hopeful to continue her efforts to find happiness and satisfaction in her future life.

Regarding ICT skill enhancement, through the digital story creation, the story creator learnt general computer use and other applications like internet browsing and emailing. Although she was not formally educated but still she devotedly performed each task and enjoyed the digital story development experience. According to the assessment of psychologists, she had low self esteem personality prior to the workshop. Her low confidence level was a source of nervousness and anxiety. She was hopeless and depressed about her future as she felt her life a complete failure. Post-workshop assessment showed that she was more talkative with others and felt happier after learning to use the computer. Her confidence level had risen after participating in the workshop. She was motivated to learn some new skill in order to earn her livelihood and

was also determined to fight against her sufferings as she did not blame her luck for her misfortunes any more.

#### STORY 4: I WANT TO RAISE MY VOICE AGAINST OPPRESSION

Infertility has become a social taboo for women in most of the developing economies. Psychological and physical abuse is observed as the outcome of not being medically fit to bear a child.

This digital story highlights the most accepted forms of violence against women in the society; psychological and physical abuse committed by a husband upon his wife because of being infertile. The story creator used her digital story to present the continued misery of an infertile woman as well as the incidents of economic exploitation that her husband and his family used to do in trade for sustaining marriage with an infertile woman. Even faced with gender based violence, the society always expects women to compromise and reconcile with the husband instead of inquiring the causes of this abuse. Through this digital story, the creator emphasizes that women do have the power to exercise their rights, and must not endure violence by keeping quiet. She concludes her story on a powerful message that because she stood up and raised her voice against the constant physical torture she faced at her in-laws, thus by creating this awareness she might indirectly be able to protect other women from facing similar forms of torture at their homes.



Figure 4 : Digital Story "I Want to Raise My Voice against Oppression"

Through the digital storytelling workshop, the story creator was trained to use computer with the help of the facilitator as she was working on the computer for the first time. She also learnt internet browsing and email communication. Psychological pre-assessment showed that her confidence level was quite low initially. She had almost collected her complete self in a hard shell and would not want to talk about her sufferings. She believed that it was due to her bad luck that everything miserable had happened to her. She would often become nervous and feel anxious. She was also experiencing eating disorders. After completing this workshop, her post assessment showed that her confidence level had risen. She wanted to talk with others and her personality was more composed. She did not feel nervous and anxious anymore.

## **DISCUSSION**

The four case studies presented above illustrate persistent struggle of married women to sustain their marriage relationship to avoid separation for which they essentially have to bear a lot of misery and hardships. However on the brighter side, opportunity to acquire technological skills through the digital storytelling workshop is envisaged as a source of empowerment for violence victims providing them opportunities to join a platform where they stand as a strong community

of empowered women, and an opportunity for boosting their self confidence and assertiveness amidst grief and sorrow.

A deeper analysis of the above cases reveals that at the root of each act of gender based violence, there is a common set of issues triggering the abuse. Each of the four women survivors of violence were economically dependent on their parents before marriage and later on their partners after marriage, reflecting that power relations determining the access and control over resources become a predominant factor in perpetuating gender violence. However it must be noted that people can be empowered through resisting disciplinary power relations. Thus, as stated by Sen, and Grown (1987) and Shirin, Parpart, and Staudt (2007) empowerment can provide new possibilities to women for moving beyond the faced economic dilemmas through persistent collective action targeting specific problems and contexts, e.g. gender based violence. This theory is echoed by Williams, Seed, and Mwau (1994) in their definition of empowerment as a state of *power with* where organization of common people is much needed to attain collective goals. Social issues like violence against women must be highlighted to create awareness around these issues and present the sufferings of the victims. The digital story development workshop provided the survivors of violence with access to a common virtual technological platform- the Internet- where they could unite and reunite to present their views more strongly in the form of digital stories on incidents of gender based violence.

The digital story development process was instrumental in empowering the participants by improving their self confidence and providing opportunity for self-healing. As discussed by Williams, Seed, and Mwau (1994) empowerment is also a process of gaining *power within* through regaining self confidence, self awareness and assertiveness by analyzing one's own experiences. Lukes (1994) also defines empowerment as individual conscientization (power

within) which emphasizes conscientizing women so they can understand and challenge gender inequality both in the home and the community. This would strengthen women to build on “the power within” for improving their ability to control resources, to determine agendas and to make decisions. This is evident in the concluding remarks of each of the story creator where the violence survivor has a sense of fulfillment and new hope after receiving the training. As reflected by the story creator in the digital story My Hope, “The training has motivated me to acquire more skills and has given me confidence that I am capable of accomplishing something in life. By learning to use ICTs even further, I wish that I can even build my own house.”

Digital storytelling is now being accepted as a medium to advocate violence against women in Pakistan as similar efforts are also being made to raise awareness among masses on various forms of gender based violence<sup>3</sup>.

## **CONCLUSION**

Various acts of gender based violence e.g. sexual harassment at workplace, acid throwing, and forced marriages have now been recognized as a crime in Pakistan. However, the society has still witnessed a substantial increase in gender based violence acts. Regarding the conduct of a woman in society, transformation of societal mind set is the prime need to emancipate the women from the gender-based violence. Thus strategies are required for awareness raising against gender based violence (Misson, 2012). This study has provided results that digital storytelling has immense potential in sharing the voices of women survivors of violence, transforming existing mind set for emancipation of women from gender based violence and empowerment of women survivors of violence.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://gawaahi.org/>

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