



# THE SONKE GENDER JUSTICE - SILENCE SPEAKS

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT:

Using Narrative and Participatory Media to Explore the Links Between Gender, Violence, and HIV and AIDS in South Africa

## A CASE STUDY



**“I DREAM OF MAKING A CHANGE. I WANT [MY VILLAGE] TO BECOME A PLACE WHERE EVERYONE CAN GO TO SLEEP AT NIGHT WITHOUT HAVING TO WORRY IF THEY WILL BE THE NEXT ONE KILLED. A PLACE WHERE GIRLS AND WOMEN STAND TALL, EXPRESS THEMSELVES WITH CONFIDENCE AND PRIDE, AND WALK FREELY IN THE STREETS. A PLACE OF PEACE, WARMTH, LOVE, AND FREEDOM.”**

**-EXCEPRT FROM A DIGITAL STORY BY NAMBASA**

## Introduction



*Adult digital storytelling workshop participants, Eastern Cape Province*

The [Center for Digital Storytelling's Silence Speaks](#) initiative supports the telling and witnessing of stories in the service of human rights promotion. Silence Speaks is grounded in the belief that personal stories can inspire, educate, and move people deeply, and that when it comes to confronting complex social issues, the connections forged through storytelling can help people bridge the differences that often divide them and instead act with wisdom, compassion, and conscience. Silence Speaks workshops blend oral history, popular education, and participatory media production methods, enabling people to create short, first-person media stories about their own lives. With the permission of

participants, stories are shared locally and globally, as tools for training, community mobilization, and policy advocacy to support dialogue and justice.

Established in 2006, Sonke Gender Justice works in Southern Africa to create the change necessary for men, women, youth, and children to enjoy equitable, healthy, and happy relationships and live within just and democratic societies. Sonke uses a human rights framework to build the capacity of government, civil society organizations, and citizens to achieve gender equality, prevent gender-based violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS.

Crucial to the success of Sonke's work is ensuring a central role for those most directly affected by violence and HIV. Since 2007, Sonke and Silence Speaks have been working together to enable young people and adults affected by violence, and HIV and AIDS to create and share their stories digitally. The aim of the collaboration is to deepen existing conversations about gender norms and prevent the further spread of these twin epidemics. From cities to rural villages, the Sonke – Silence Speaks Digital Storytelling Project has offered South African men and women a rare opportunity to talk about their own experiences and bear witness to the lives of others.

## The Sonke - Silence Speaks Digital Storytelling Workshops

While stereotyped representations of masculinity and sensationalized portrayals of gender-based violence can readily be found in global popular media, the Sonke digital stories present an alternative vision—one that emphasizes the importance of reflection, hope, and a vision of change.

**“TODAY I CAN STAND IN FRONT OF PEOPLE AND SPEAK OPENLY ABOUT HIV AND AIDS. I EVEN TELL AND ENCOURAGE OTHER MEN TO GET TESTED, SO THAT THEY CAN KNOW THEIR STATUS. WE MUST PROTECT THE ONES WE SAY WE LOVE.”**

**-EXCERPT FROM A DIGITAL STORY BY ANDILE**

Silence Speaks has worked with Sonke to coordinate nine workshops, including two pilot sessions, an assistant facilitator training workshop with Sonke staff, three rural workshops with men and women affected by HIV and AIDS, two rural workshops with young people affected by HIV and AIDS, and one workshop with traditional leaders.<sup>1</sup> In each of these sessions, participants explored how their past life experiences have led to their personal commitments to challenge violence and expose its connection to HIV and AIDS. Most of the workshops were held in community-based settings, using a mobile laptop computer lab that Silence Speaks outfitted and prepared for the project. Some sessions were fully participatory, with facilitators assisting storytellers in hands-on editing of their own videos; others involved a modified process, with storytellers selecting images and video clips and instructors completing final video edits. Sonke staff assisted Silence Speaks facilitators by providing emotional, script-related, and technical support. Where necessary, Sonke staff also played a key role in language translation and interpretation.

For all workshops, Silence Speaks employed a careful process of informed consent to ensure that participants were ready to share their stories. Facilitators helped participants decide what information they felt comfortable revealing, in their scripts and images, and talked with them about the potential implications of bringing their stories into the public realm.

The workshop series has served numerous purposes, including familiarizing Sonke staff with the techniques of digital storytelling; supporting the healing of survivors of violence; building local leadership among rural residents impacted by HIV and AIDS; providing youth with skills for avoiding abuse and protecting themselves from HIV and other STIs; and elevating the voices of trusted community leaders who are speaking and acting with courage in support of gender equality. Together, the collection of Sonke stories recounts hardships and celebrates achievements related to everyday struggles with memory and identity along with the search for safety, acceptance, and dignity. To view stories online, visit:

<http://www.genderjustice.org.za/tools/digital-stories/view-featured.html>

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<sup>1</sup> South Africa's Constitution establishes the right of communities living under traditional law and custom to influence the way in which the country is run. Houses of Traditional Leaders (known also as Amakhosi, or kings) exist in some provinces to carry out an advisory role in government. Each provincial House nominates three members to a National House of Traditional Leaders, which elects its own office-bearers. The National House advises the national government on the role of traditional leaders and on customary law.

## Sharing the Stories

Sonke's purpose in sharing digital stories is to make local voices and images the centerpiece of its campaigns to promote new visions of masculinity and gender equality in South Africa. Sonke staff and partners are screening these videos in a variety of settings, as tools for encouraging reflection and opening hearts and minds about how gender norms and violence impact health, relationships, and the spread of HIV. The goal is for viewers to come away with a deeper awareness of the challenge of ending violence and HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa, as well as a picture of what committed men and women are doing to inspire individuals, communities, organizations and policymakers towards action.

Sonke – Silence Speaks digital story distribution has been deeply informed by research and practice in Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC), which examines the role of communication in eliciting social change across many levels of analysis, including individual behaviors and social norms.<sup>2</sup> SBCC utilizes three guiding strategies: behavior change communication, social mobilization, and advocacy. Behavior change communication focuses primarily on the individual and community levels and employs participatory methodologies. Social mobilization addresses efforts for partnership and alliance development within and across communities. Advocacy seeks to ensure political and social commitment to specific causes. Specific examples of how Sonke – Silence Speaks stories are being shared within the SBCC framework are described below. A further description of how the SBCC model has been adapted for digital storytelling can be found on [page 8](#).



*Rural village, Eastern Cape Province*



*Workshop setting, Eastern Cape Province*

## Story Compilations and Discussion Guides

With the goal of ensuring that a wide range of audiences can view the stories, Silence Speaks produced four unique compilation DVD story collections featuring work in English, Xhosa, Venda, and other South African languages (with English subtitles), along with accompanying discussion guides. The story collections address a spectrum of public health and human rights issues including gender equality, HIV stigma, xenophobia, interpersonal violence, and sexual assault. Sonke staff are using these collections as part of the organization's ongoing series of "One Man Can" trainings to convene and guide the advocacy efforts of local Community Action Teams, as well as in professional development seminars within the health and criminal justice sectors. Sonke has also distributed the DVDs and guides across its extensive network of organizational partners. The entire collection of stories as well as PDF versions of the discussion guides are available for viewing/download on the Sonke web site at:

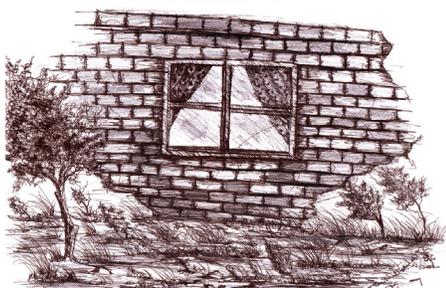
<http://www.genderjustice.org.za/tools/digital-stories/discussion-guides.html>

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<sup>2</sup> USAID (2012) C Modules: A Learning Package for Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC), available online at <http://c-changeprogram.org/focus-areas/capacity-strengthening/sbcc-modules>

## Supporting South African Traditional Leaders in Speaking Up For Healthy Communities

Since its early days, Sonke has supported Traditional Leaders across South Africa in empowering community members to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS and challenge gender inequalities that are in conflict with the spirit of South Africa's Constitution. In an effort to bring the voices of Traditional Leaders to the forefront of ongoing national debates about the role of tradition and culture in health



promotion, the Sonke- Silence Speaks Digital Storytelling Project coordinated a workshop with Traditional Leaders and produced a compilation DVD and Discussion Guide entitled, "Stories of Courage and Leadership: South African Traditional Leaders Speak Out to Engage Men in Creating Healthy Communities." Leaders from KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape Provinces created powerful digital stories that explore the links between and among history, poverty, gender, violence, and HIV and AIDS. The workshop and materials were developed as pieces of a larger Sonke training and advocacy program aimed at raising awareness and garnering the commitment of Traditional Leaders throughout South Africa to support efforts for community empowerment and development.

*"When I think about how many problems there are, I think of this story: One day, a man looked out his window during a big storm in the countryside. He noticed that, among the white, snow-covered hills, a small patch of ground remained clear. He went outside to find out why that ground was clear and found a small bird warming that bit of earth. So I see that I can be that bird. I can't fix the problems of the whole world, but I can try with all my strength to ensure that problems are minimized within my own community." -Excerpt from a digital story by Inkosi Zitha Lethukuthula Zondi*

## Training Men to Support Sexual Assault Survivors

In December 2007, after ten years of research and debate focused on how to replace an outdated apartheid-era understanding of the South African government's responsibility to protect citizens from sexual offences and seek justice on behalf of those who are victimized, the country passed the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters- SOA) Amendment Act. While enacting this landmark piece of legislation was a key step in supporting the rights of sexual violence survivors, widespread public education and the creation of community-based mechanisms for holding government accountable continue to be critical for effective enforcement.

**"I WAS TRYING TO CATEGORIZE TYPES OF RAPE ... FOR EXAMPLE, THIS IS BIG, THIS IS SMALL. BUT AFTER I CAME TO THE TRAINING, THERE'S NO BIG OR SMALL. WHATEVER COUNTS AS A RAPE, IS RAPE, AND IS BAD."**

**-SEXUAL OFFENCES ACT TRAINING PARTICIPANT**

Sonke recognized that it could play a role in raising men's awareness of the new law and collaborated with Silence Speaks to develop and pilot a training and communications effort designed to build knowledge and skills among men for appropriately supporting survivors of rape and sexual assault and advocating for the enforcement of the SOA. This effort involved:

- Designing and field testing a curriculum for the training, which centralizes stories as case study scenarios for awareness-raising, information giving, and role-playing activities;

- Developing a written brochure for men about the SOA, which features the script and images from one of the digital stories as core content; and
- Preparing and broadcasting short, edited versions of several relevant digital stories as radio public service announcements to inform members of the general public about the SOA.



*Demonstration in support of gender equality in Johannesburg Inkosi Zitha Lethukuthula Zondi, Kwa-Zulu Natal Province; Image from Inkosi Zondi's story*

## Mobilizing Communities Through Radio

The Silence Speaks – Sonke Digital Storytelling Project has also pioneered innovative ways for presenting its collection of digital stories on community radio. As part of a large-scale radio communications project, Silence Speaks scripted a series of call-in shows focused on gender and HIV and AIDS. Each show features a digital story as a jumping off point for discussion between program hosts and Sonke “experts,” with opportunities for listeners to call in or text their comments and questions. The digital stories were re-recorded in several of South Africa’s official languages, and hosts at local community radio stations were trained on Sonke’s rights-based approach to engaging women and men in the prevention of gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS. Following these trainings, the digital story-based radio shows were broadcast at the local stations, in the relevant local language, resulting in rich discussions and active participation by listeners.

## Ethical Practice

The work of the Sonke – Silence Speaks Digital Storytelling Project has surfaced a number of key learnings about the ethics of bringing deeply personal narratives into public arenas. As a result of this learning, Silence Speaks has developed the following principles for ethical practice in digital storytelling,<sup>4</sup> with the hope that they will remind existing and new partners of the need to ensure the safety and dignity of storytellers worldwide.

*Well-Being.* Storytellers’ physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing should be at the center of all phases of a project. The process of creating stories within a workshop is as important as the end products (media pieces) resulting from the workshop. Facilitators should be attentive to the ways in which culture and power can impact the facilitator – storyteller relationship and, when working cross-culturally, should adopt a stance of cultural humility. Cultural humility requires the facilitator to examine her/his own assumptions and prejudices about people who come from different communities than their own; put these assumptions aside when working with others; and engage respectfully with all people, recognizing that they are the facilitator’s guides in defining cultural identity, values, knowledge, behaviors, and actions.

Strategies to ensure the wellbeing of vulnerable participants are also particularly important; the digital storytelling process is not appropriate for individuals currently experiencing strong symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.<sup>5</sup> If trauma is a potential topic within a workshop, a licensed clinician therapist,

<sup>4</sup> Special thanks to Aline Gubrium, Lucy Harding, Photovoice UK, and WITNESS for their important contributions to these principles.

<sup>5</sup> PTSD is a potentially debilitating anxiety disorder triggered by exposure to a traumatic experience such as an interpersonal event like physical or sexual assault, exposure to disaster or accidents, combat or witnessing a traumatic event. There are three main clusters of symptoms: firstly, those related to re-experiencing the event; secondly, those related to avoidance and arousal; and thirdly, the distress and impairment caused by the first two symptom clusters.

(e.g. social worker, MFT, etc.) should be present to provide any needed emotional support. Storytellers who are sharing stories about especially painful life experiences should be gently guided in approaching their narratives from a position of strength rather than from a vantage point that reinforces victimization. Facilitators should maintain appropriate boundaries at all times while remaining open to processes of listening and understanding.

*Informed Choices.* Storytellers must have the ability to make informed choices about the content, production, and use of their work. Storytellers should be provided with the information they need to make these choices and should have the right to withdraw their stories from public circulation at any time, recognizing the constraints of withdrawal from Internet forms of distribution. Facilitators must strive to offer guidance in these decision-making processes in a way that considers risks and protects the dignity and safety of storytellers.

*Ownership.* Storytellers have the right to freedom of expression in representing themselves, in their stories. They should be provided with the space and flexibility to describe what they have experienced, within the parameters or thematic concerns of a given project, and without being coerced or censored. If they so desire, storytellers should be engaged in outlining context and messages to accompany their stories. Storytellers have the right to determine whether or not their names are attached to their stories and whether images of themselves / others are blurred to protect privacy and are entitled to reliable and responsible guidance from facilitators regarding the potential risks and benefits of these decisions. Storytellers and facilitators must agree to maintain confidentiality about information and materials that are shared in a workshop but that may not make it into publicly circulated stories.

*Local Relevance.* The digital storytelling process should be sensitive and appropriate to the local context of a given project. Facilitators should work with local partners to ensure culturally appropriate emotional support within workshops – and, where possible, engage the assistance of local teaching assistants, interpreters/translators, etc. Workshop facilitators should follow the principles of cultural humility<sup>6</sup> and, to the extent possible, workshops should be conducted in local languages with assistance from facilitators who are “cultural insiders.” Methods should be adapted to fit local technological resources and capacities, emphasizing always the importance of first-person voice, group process, and participatory production methods.

*Ethical Story Distribution.* Digital storytelling projects should be conceived, designed, funded, and implemented from a place of clarity among facilitators and partners, and transparency with/buy-in from storytellers about story distribution goals and methods. Story distribution strategies should be rooted in the needs of and designed to benefit local communities first and foremost, rather than serving the agendas of distant viewers or funders. Where possible and if storytellers so desire, they should be involved in public presentations of their stories. Viewing audiences should be advised in advance if stories contain deeply sensitive material and should be provided with opportunities to talk about what they have seen and heard. Stories of trauma should be shown only in carefully facilitated venues and with the involvement of a licensed clinician or an individual knowledgeable about the issues portrayed, who can debrief audiences and provide referrals to support services, if necessary.

*Ethics as Process.* Those undertaking digital storytelling projects should view ethics as a process, rather than as a one-off occasion of “gaining consent.” Ongoing dialogue between storytellers, facilitators, and partner organizations/institutions about how best to design and implement an ethically responsible project is key to ethical practice.

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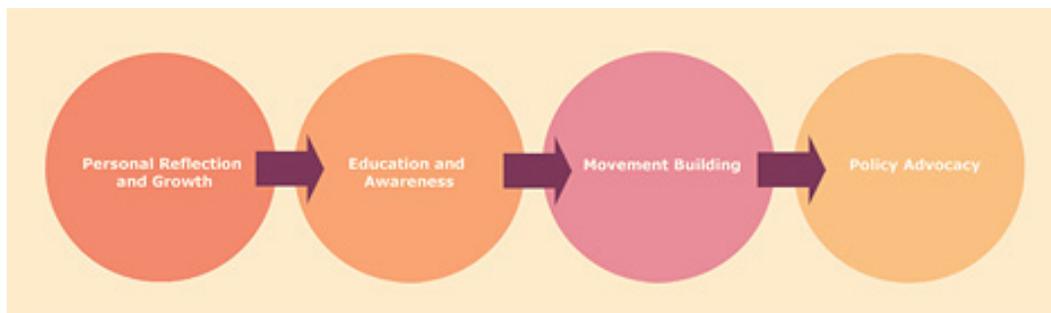
<sup>6</sup> Cultural humility involves examining your own assumptions and prejudices about people who come from different communities than your own; putting these assumptions aside when working with others; and engaging respectfully with all people, recognizing that they are your guides in determining their own cultural identity, values, knowledge, behaviors, and actions.

## A Continuum of Impacts

**“I NEVER THOUGHT THAT TECHNOLOGY WOULD BE ABLE TO HELP ASSIST ME WITH HEALING SOME PARTS OF [MY] PERSONAL LIFE.”**

**- INTERVIEW WITH WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT**

The Sonke – Silence Speaks Digital Storytelling Project has led to the creation of an important model of the potential impacts of digital storytelling, which rests in a continuum of strategies for developing and sharing stories. Below is a graphic representation and description of this continuum, which bears considerable resemblance to the SBCC model and illustrates how digital storytelling can elicit and document change at a number of levels:



*Personal Reflection and Growth.* Digital storytelling workshops offer a safe, supportive environment in which participants of all ages and walks of life can explore their histories and reflect on how they got to where they are. Through making stories, participants connect deeply with themselves and with others, thereby accessing the hope and intimacy that trauma and other difficult life experiences often obscure.

*Education, Training, and Awareness.* Beyond the language and technology literacy education that happens in the context of a workshop, digital stories are ideal tools for supporting learning and awareness. Their directness of emotional expression makes them appropriate for use in support groups, training sessions, and community settings, to encourage individual behavior change, build specific skills, and raise awareness about social and political issues.

*Community and Movement Building.* Digital storytelling offers wonderful opportunities to examine issues across chasms of difference – be they cultural, linguistic, political, racial, gendered, age-related, etc. Workshop participants gain insight into perspectives they may not previously have considered or felt and are impelled towards leadership and civic participation. Community story screenings can generate deep and strategic discussion about systemic inequalities and function as opportunities to map out action strategies for justice.

*Policy Advocacy and Enforcement.* Digital stories are ideal for educating and influencing leaders and decision makers in government and other institutions about policies that need to be developed. Stories are also invaluable to public awareness raising and training efforts, to support accountability in enforcement. This work can be assisted by placement of story images and text on billboards; broadcast of stories on local radio or television outlets; and story distribution through social media tools.

## Conclusion



*Youth digital storytelling workshop participants and facilitator, Eastern Cape Province*

While we have lacked the resources to comprehensively evaluate the Sonke - Silence Speaks project on both storytellers and story viewers, the results of two qualitative studies express the influence that digital storytelling has had on trauma healing, technology skills development, civic dialogue, and rural youth education and service delivery.

First, a qualitative research project<sup>7</sup> focused on two pilot workshops held in Cape Town revealed many positive effects of digital storytelling, on the women and men who created stories. Analysis of case study workshops and interviews with participants showed that digital storytelling increased their access to and comfort level with technology tools, which are often not

readily available to low-income South Africans. The study also found that the workshops helped storytellers confront their traumatic experiences, find a sense of ownership over these experiences, and share their experiences with others, through creating their own stories.

Secondly, as part of a pilot project designed to explore the educational value of digital stories created by youth, Sonke brought a subset of the youth digital stories to several schools in Eastern Cape Province.<sup>8</sup> These educational sessions proved successful in encouraging students to speak out about health issues and launched community conversations about issues of sexual assault, sexual identity, and HIV and AIDS. The classroom discussions held after students viewed the 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.

**“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.”**

**— CLASSROOM PILOT PARTICIPANT**

As Sonke continues to share the collection of digital stories in the context of its training and advocacy efforts, our hope is to build in additional research strategies that can explore the impact the stories are having on viewers, with the goal of demonstrating that these moving personal narratives can provide critical information and prompt action for community and policy change to confront gender-based violence and prevent and address HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa.

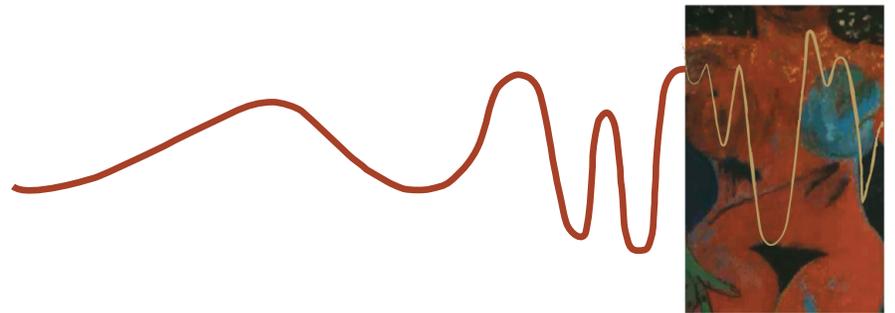
<sup>7</sup> Tolly, K. 2007. Digital stories as tools for change: a study of the dynamics of technology use in social change and activism. Unpublished master’s thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

<sup>8</sup> More information about this pilot project can be found at: <http://seminar.net/index.php/component/content/article/75-current-issue/146-dont-keep-it-to-yourself-digital-storytelling-with-south-african-youth>

**“I WANT OTHER GIRLS TO LEARN FROM MY STORY. I WANT THEM TO KNOW THEIR RIGHTS AND SEE THAT LOVE IS ABOUT MORE THAN ATTRACTION OR SEX. I WANT THEM TO HAVE A FUTURE. GIRLS NEED TO BE BRAVE AND HAVE COURAGE TO SHARE PERSONAL PROBLEMS. COMMUNITIES MUST BE WILLING TO LISTEN TO WHAT THEY HAVE TO SAY. AND EVERYONE MUST BREAK THE SILENCE.”**

**-EXCERPT FROM A DIGITAL STORY BY GUGU**

For more information, or to find out how to partner with Silence Speaks on human rights-related participatory media efforts, please visit us online at [www.silencespeaks.org](http://www.silencespeaks.org) or contact us at [amylenita@storycenter.org](mailto:amylenita@storycenter.org).



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**Sonke Gender  
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HIV/AIDS, Gender Equality, Human Rights

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