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Digital Storytelling to Empower Sex Workers: Warning, Relieving and Liberating

Sigrid Kannengießner

Introduction: Digital Storytelling for Women Empowerment

Women have used information and communication technologies (ICTs) to empower themselves or other women for a long time. The development of new ICTs leads to new challenges regarding the access and representation of women, but it also provides new possibilities of empowerment. In this article, a new strategy of empowerment using new ICTs is analysed: digital storytelling. Digital stories in this context are short films, which are produced with and distributed through digital media. In workshops for digital storytelling those production processes are conducted as processes of empowerment. Such a workshop, which was organized in South Africa by the feminist non-governmental organisation (NGO) Women'sNet¹ for sex workers in 2010, will serve as a case study for analysing digital storytelling as a tool for women's empowerment.

Within this workshop, every participant produced a digital story, a short film, about her own life. The point in time for this particular seminar was very sensitive, as the FIFA World Cup in 2010 provoked a new debate about legalising sex work in South Africa. Therefore, one aim of the workshop was to produce digital stories for the purpose of lobbying for legalising sex work. In this article, I will analyse the meanings constructed by the workshop participants regarding the digital storytelling and the workshop itself: What does it mean for the women to produce the digital stories and to be part of the seminar? I follow this question by focussing on digital storytelling as a means of empowerment. The article is structured as follows: First, I will consider the relevant research regarding digital storytelling in general and digital storytelling as an empowerment tool in particular. After that, the structure of the subsequently examined workshop for digital storytelling will be described. Before analysing the seminar, it is necessary to give some background information on sex work in South Africa. Finally, the workshop is analysed regarding the empowerment of the participants.

¹ "Women'sNet is a feminist organisation that works to advance gender equality and justice in South Africa, through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)" (Women'sNet, n. d.). For further information, see <http://www.womensnet.org.za/>.

The analysis is based on an empirical study: I conducted a participatory observation in the workshop, qualitative interviews with seven participants, and a film analysis of the digital stories. This empirical material was analysed using the Grounded Theory approach (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1996). It is important to stress that I am not making an evaluation of the seminar; instead I am interested in the meanings that the participants constructed regarding digital storytelling and the workshop in reference to empowerment.

What Is Digital Storytelling?

Digital stories are produced and distributed by digital media. The forms and format of digital stories differ, but in this context a digital story can be defined as a “short, first-person video-narrative created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds” (Center for Digital Storytelling n. d.). Digital stories are also referred to as mediated stories (Lundby 2008b). Digital stories are *mediatised* as media are used for the process of telling as well as for the process of listening or watching. Through the use of digital media, the storytelling becomes *digital*. The format of the digital media influences the way the stories are told (Lundby 2008a: 6 and Bratteteig 2008). Nick Couldry lists four features of digital media which influence the narrative of digital stories: “first, a pressure to mix texts with other materials . . .; second, a pressure to limit the length of narrative . . .; third, a pressure towards standardization . . .; fourth, a pressure to take account of the possibility that any narrative when posted online may have unintended and undesired audiences” (Couldry 2008: 49).

As digital stories are produced with non-professional equipment (Lundby 2008a: 2), non-professional media practitioners and marginalised groups can raise their voices through these stories. They get the possibility of self-representation: Digital stories “are representations in the first person. The ‘self’ is social, shaped in relationships, and through the stories we tell about who we are” (ibid.: 5). The storyteller tells her or his story with her or his own voice, with her or his own words, and also chooses the pictures that visualise the story. Being self-representations, the digital stories are autobiographies and suggest authenticity (Hertzberg and Lundby 2008: 108–9).

The term digital *storytelling* expresses that not only is the product of importance, but also the process of storytelling and the production of the story itself. “‘Digital storytelling’ is a workshop-based practice in which people are taught to use digital media to create short audio-video stories, usually about their own lives” (Hartley and McWilliam 2009: 3).

Having its origin in the U. S.-American Center for Digital Storytelling,² the practice of these workshops has spread all over the world. The seminar

2 For more information about the Center for Digital Storytelling, see <http://www.storycenter.org/>.

discussed later follows the workshop format, which was developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling. In a quantitative study, Kelly McWilliam lists where workshops for digital storytelling are conducted, and which institutions offer those seminars (McWilliam 2009). The main aim of the workshops is to empower the workshop participants, who are mainly socially marginalised people whose situation should be improved (ibid.: 60). The seminar provides a space where the participants get the possibility to share their experiences: “People open up and share their stories when they are provided an environment where they feel that their ideas will be valued, their stories have resonance, and they feel safe” (Lambert 2009: 86). The concrete aims depend on the group of participants and the context in which the workshop takes place. Relevant for the analysis in this article is a study analysing a project of the South African non-governmental organisations Sonke Gender Justice Network and the Center for Digital Storytelling Speaks Initiative for youths in the South African province Eastern Cape (Reed 2010). Although the author, Amber Reed, has made predominantly an evaluation of the project, some of her findings are very interesting: The workshop for digital storytelling, which was conducted as a part of the project, functions as a computer training course as well as an encouragement for the youths to tell their stories and talk about their concerns (ibid.: 277). Some of these findings are similar to the ones in the following analysis.

Workshops for Digital Storytelling

The five-day workshop “Digital Storytelling and Sex Work” analysed here took place in Johannesburg, South Africa. The participants were all female sex workers and members of the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Task Force (SWEAT), a South African NGO which partnered with Women’sNet to organise this workshop.³ SWEAT supports and lobbies on behalf of sex workers. The seminar was financed by OSISA, the Open Society Institute of Southern Africa. In this seminar every participant produced her film, telling her own story.

At the beginning of the workshop, every woman spoke about her experiences as a sex worker within a story circle. After this, the participants wrote their stories down using Microsoft Word on the laptops that they were provided with. Most of the participants had never used a computer before. After having typed the stories, the participants read their texts out loud, which were then recorded by the trainers using the open-source software Audacity.

Then the women searched for pictures (under the creative commons license) on the World Wide Web, or took their own photos using a small digital camera during the workshop. They used these pictures to visualise their stories. The participants were then supported by the two trainers in

³ For detailed information about SWEAT, visit <http://www.sweat.org.za>.

producing their stories with Windows Movie Maker. At the end of the seminar, every film was shown to the plenum and discussed.

Before I analyse the meanings constructed by the participants regarding the workshop and the digital storytelling, I will first frame the situation of sex workers in South Africa, which is necessary to understand the statements from my interview partners.

Sex Work in South Africa

In the following, background information about the situation of sex workers in South Africa is given, as this is essential for the workshop analysis. The following explanations focus on female sex workers, as the sex workers participating in the seminar were only females.

The situation of sex workers in South Africa is regulated by South African law, which criminalises sex work under the Sexual Offences Act of 1957 (SWEAT 2006b). Their legal status puts sex workers in a position where they easily become victims of violence:

Sex workers . . . are considered immoral and deserving of punishment. Criminalization of sex work contributes to an environment in which violence against sex workers is tolerated, leaving them less likely to be protected from it (Rekart, cited in WHO 2005: 1).

Therefore, it is unlikely that the sex workers report experiences of violence, rape, or other crimes to the police as the role of a sex worker puts them in a criminalised position. Moreover, sex workers become the victims of discrimination or violence at the hands of the police. “Sex workers have reported to SWEAT, and studies have documented the mistreatment and abuse of sex workers when they are arrested” (Massawe 2010).

Their criminalized status also leads to social stigmatisation:

The continued criminalization of sex workers has contributed to the stigma, isolation and violation of human rights of sex workers. Sex workers are often forced to work in isolated and remote areas. These working conditions not only make them vulnerable to violence and abuse, but also make it very difficult for intervention projects to locate them to do prevention work (Lalu 2007: 1).

A vicious circle is formed: Their criminalised status leads to social stigmatisation, which leads to further acts of violence against sex workers, which they cannot report to the police because of their criminalised status. Their status forces sex workers into a criminalised environment:

The criminalisation of the industry increases the vulnerability of sex workers to violence and exploitation, by forcing sex workers further underground, hindering access to health and legal services and increasing the stigma attached to the work (Massawe 2010).

Sex workers are one of the most vulnerable groups for HIV infections; at the same time they are accused of spreading the virus (WHO 2005: 1–2). It is estimated that half of all female sex workers in South Africa are HIV pos-

itive (Agbiboia 2010). Many of them do not access anti-retroviral treatment as they fear discrimination and violence (WHO 2005: 2).

The legal status of sex workers in South Africa deteriorates the situation of the women but does not erase sex work at all: “Criminalising the sex work industry does not eradicate it, but simply makes it impossible to control or regulate” (SWEAT 2006b).

Many sex workers are not in full control over their lives; but not every female sex worker sees herself as a victim:

There is also a need to recognize that not all sex workers see themselves as victims, oppressed, or exploited. . . . Some of the most successful sex work interventions have been led and run by sex workers and have allowed them to organize themselves for their own safety (WHO 2005: 3).

One example of organisation of sex workers in South Africa is the NGO Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Task Force (SWEAT), which co-organised the workshop for digital storytelling. SWEAT tries to improve the working and living conditions of its members and lobbies for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. The difference between legalising and decriminalising has to be emphasised: While legalising sex work would lead to the regulation and control of sex work by the government, decriminalising would improve the situation of sex workers without regulating interferences (Sutherland 2010). The former South African police commissioner Jackie Selebi “proposed legalising or at least tolerating sex work” temporarily, “for the duration of the World Cup, arguing that the police force lacked the manpower to enforce the law in these areas. He added that legalising sex work would free his officers to deal with more pressing security issues” (Agbiboia 2010). Selebi’s argumentation did not aim at improving the situation of sex workers, nor did he have enduring legalisation in mind; he only considered the capacities of the police during the World Cup and was hoping for relief for the police during this event (ibid.). This temporary legalisation of sex work during the World Cup was not realised. But, as SWEAT argues,

[d]ecriminalising the sex work industry would preclude the need for protection outside of the police services. It would also enable sex workers to access services which are taken for granted by persons able to prove an income, such as opening a bank account, securing accommodation and access to loans, all of which are currently not available to them, and therefore makes them more vulnerable to the criminal element (SWEAT 2010).

The World Health Organisation recommends mobilising sex workers and supporting them against violence and discrimination (WHO 2005: 4–5). One example for this support is the “Digital Storytelling and Sex Work” workshop analysed in this article.

Digital Storytelling to Empower Female Sex Workers in South Africa

The participants of the “Digital Storytelling and Sex Work” workshop are in the situation described above. They are confronted with violence and crime, HIV/AIDS, drugs and the necessity to fulfil the role of the breadwinner in their families, as most of them are single mothers and many also take care of their siblings. The digital storytelling workshop aimed at empowering the women in their difficult situations. Again, the following analysis is not an evaluation of the seminar but an analysis of the meanings produced by the participants and the attitudes they formed regarding the workshop and digital storytelling in general.

Self-representation and Warning

All of the workshop participants told their personal stories in their films and described their reasons for becoming sex workers. As participant Mbali Silongo explains in an interview, “My story is about my life, . . . my background and how I get to this job of sex work.” The entry into sex work is also one of the topics in Mudiwa Kaleni’s story: “I told . . . about myself. Me, . . . how I went into prostitution, getting infected with HIV.” 30-year-old participant Joy Bhebhe told her story in her film in Zulu, a South African language, but the pictures of women, men and children, of the police, prison and graves, allow the viewer to imagine what her experiences are like. The women tell their stories with their own voices in a voiceover; the sound dominates the image, which visualises the text. As the participants speak about their lives, the digital stories become self-representations. Their voices suggest authenticity, and as the women talk about their lives, the films become autobiographies.

Most of the participants became sex workers because they had to support themselves or their children financially. 28-year-old Scarlett Mabuza tells in her film: “I make a lot of money. I use my money to buy clothes, food, cosmetic and I pay my rent.” She visualises this text with images of U. S.-American Dollar notes, clothes and vegetables. 32-year-old Mbali Silongo wants to support her siblings with the money she earns with her job; she explains in her film: “I started this job when my mother passed away. ‘Cause I didn’t have any choice. I decided to do it for my five siblings ‘cause I was the oldest sister.” Silongo shows pictures of a grave, children’s shoes and a photo of herself. The picture of herself shows her from the back to avoid identification. Like Silongo, Mudiwa Kaleni explains her choice of becoming a sex worker with the early death of her mother in her film: “I believe if my mother didn’t pass on, I wouldn’t have gone into prostitution and getting infected with HIV/AIDS.”

The participants tell about their experiences of HIV/AIDS infection and violence in their digital stories. One example is the very personal experience told by Mbali Silongo in her digital story: “There was a day that I

won't forget in my life. The day when my client took me in his house and after finish[ing] his work, he kicked me out with nothing." She chooses a picture of herself walking down some stairs (taken from the back to avoid identification) to visualise how she left her client's house.

Experiences of discrimination are also represented in the films. Scarlett Mabuza states in her film: "I'm feeling bad when people are pointing fingers at me, saying I am a bitch, a criminal, an HIV-infected." She takes a picture of her back to visualise this text and puts the writing "Bitch!" on the photo in red letters. In doing so, she confronts herself in the picture with the discrimination she is confronted with in her life. She represents herself and the way she sees herself perceived by society. Therefore, the digital stories are not only self-representations of the participants but also representations of South African society through the eyes of the sex workers. In addition to their experiences with discrimination, the women also talk about their experiences with the police in their films. Amahle Mushwana shows pictures of police cars and a clenched fist while saying: "Even the police are harassing us. They beat us, also shock us or demand sex without paying."

So far my argument is that digital stories are formats of self-representation, which allow the workshop participants to represent their personal experiences. Knut Lundby stresses that digital storytelling is not only *producing* a story but also *sharing* one's own story with others (Lundby 2008a: 3). Regarding the sex workers, there is a risky moment in sharing their stories. Showing themselves in their stories and publishing them might mean provoking more discrimination against them. In showing only parts of their bodies or their backs, the sex workers find ways of self-representation which do not bear the risk of identification. Most of the women want their digital stories to be published for various reasons: They want to show people in other countries what the situation of sex workers in South Africa is like, they want other people to understand, and they want to warn others as Amahle Mushwana does in her film: "So what I want to say to other women is, that sex work is not a job that you can rely on because it's a dangerous job and you put your life on risk." Mbali Silongo also sees herself as a deterrent: "Others they will learn that to be a prostitute is not a good job. They'll learn that 'cause they will hear my advantages and . . . my disadvantages there."

Most participants agree with publishing their digital stories in an anonymous surrounding but do not want their families to see their films, because most of their relatives do not know about their jobs as sex workers.

Hope and Demands

The workshop participants address unspecified Others to inform them of their situation and warn them, but they also hope for help: "You never know . . . who's going to help you because when you say your stories . . . most of the people . . . get interested in . . . your story. And they . . . can

change your life”, says 36-year-old Genesis Nkosi. Joy Bhebhe hopes for advice: “Maybe if I can tell the people, maybe I’ll get people they can give me advice what I must do instead of do what I’m doing. Maybe they’ll help me with something.”

Besides this hope for help, the sex workers also demand action from the South African government to change their situation. As Delisiwe Shabangu says:

My story is . . . like, we just ask our government to take care of us. We just tell government: Don’t take us as we’re animals, we’re human being[s]. We don’t like to do this job but because of poverty in this country we can’t feed us . . . [or] give us whatever we need.

Shabangu constructs a collective of sex workers confronting the South African government. She regards poverty as one of the reasons why women become sex workers. A similar argument is brought up by Scarlett Mabuza:

I want sex work to be decriminalised because in South Africa there’s no jobs. . . . Being a sex worker is not like you . . . [are] stealing someone’s money, you grab a bag . . . , no it’s just an agreement between you and your client.

If one perceives coherence between criminalisation, discrimination and violence (as it was stated above), one can understand why Amahle Mushwana regards the decriminalisation of sex work as freedom: “I am talking to government that . . . the government must . . . decriminalise, legalise sex workers so that they can be free.” In her film, she addresses the South African government and demands decriminalisation of sex workers, saying: “What I want government to do is to create more jobs like building some firms. . . . Government must build some hotel so that everyone will be safe and secure. And government must hear our voices.” She chooses a picture of Jacob Zuma, president of South Africa, to symbolise the South African government.

Scarlett Mabuza addresses not only Zuma but also the United Nations, which she wants to take action: “If our president can do something together with the UN, maybe they treat us with respect and get access to the law.”

Relieving and Liberating

In addition to provoking other actors to take action, the women describe the telling of their stories in the workshop context as relieving. Scarlett Mabuza explains:

[Telling the story is] a big relief for me, it’s a big relief because what I’m doing now is a big secret, . . . because my family, I don’t want to tell them what I’m doing; even my friends at home they don’t know. . . . It’s like you’re in a shade or you’re hiding yourself.

In the story circle the women tell their stories to like-minded people who have similar experiences. The moment Genesis Nkosi tells her story, she feels happy: “I feel happy because . . . when you’ve got something inside

your heart you want even to tell it out, . . . you always feel guilty inside your heart but at times if you tell something out, you be happy.” Mudiwa Kaleni, who was raped during her job, perceives the storytelling as pain relieving: “I feel good when I say something that’s happened to me to somebody, it always changes a lot. . . . At least it’s, it’s out of me. . . . I don’t feel much pain.” In the context of the workshop, the women had the possibility to speak about their experiences without any risk of discrimination. The participants shared their experiences and formed a community of solidarity.

Delisiwe Shabangu states that she wants to learn more about the other participants: “I want to learn more about our lives. . . . I learn more about us, about how good you feel when you’re doing this; outside this job we’re doing now.” She feels part of the group and declares during the workshop: “I am here to take care of myself.” The seminar provides a secure space for the participants who repeatedly speak about the dangerous situation outside. Amahle Mushwana even feels as if she was somewhere else while participating in the seminar: “I feel that . . . I’m . . . someway outside South Africa.” In the workshop setting, the participants can speak about their experiences without fear.

Telling their stories with their own voices, many participants experience an empowerment process. They explain that they gain new self-esteem through the (digital) storytelling. Mudiwa Kaleni says she is not afraid anymore after having told her story; she learned to speak her mind: “I can say anything, anytime.” Mbali Silongo stresses the importance of the storytelling: “I can say it, it makes me proud of myself. . . . To be proud of what I am.” Scarlett Mabuza states that she learns to stand up for herself outside of the workshop context. Amahle Mushwana has a sense of freedom while participating in the seminar. “I feel as if maybe South Africa[n] sex workers, they are free. The way I talk and the way I do the movie.” South Africa for her symbolises bondage, discrimination and criminalisation. On the contrary, the workshop gives her freedom: “They give us time to think.” This “time to think” also enables the participants to learn; Mudiwa Kaleni’s motivation for participating is her thirst of knowledge: “I like to learn everything that comes on my way. I want to know everything so that’s why I’m starting this [workshop]. I want to get more information and knowledge that I can get from this workshop.” Gaining more knowledge is empowering for her.

Media Training and Change

The production of knowledge becomes concrete in the media training. For all of my interview partners it is their first time to use a computer and the World Wide Web, so getting to know how to use these ICTs is one of their biggest motivations for taking part in the workshop. Some of the women express their hopes to receive a qualification which enables them to apply for other jobs and get out of sex work, which they describe as “not a good job” or “dangerous”. The sex workers hope for change in their lives, as

Scarlett Mabuza puts it: “Now, I want a better future, I wish to get a job. . . . I want a better life.” This is also a motivation for Joy Bhebhe to participate in the seminar: “[I participate] because I want to change my life, what I am doing, because I’m not happy.”

As media training, the workshop symbolises a way out of sex work for the participants. They describe an inhibition to ICTs, which they are able to overcome through the digital storytelling. Mbali Silongo explains that she wants to learn “the digital” in the seminar because she does not have any possibilities to do so outside the seminar. Joy Bhebhe states that the workshop was the beginning of a learning process: “I think because I know a little bit; I think now I’ll carry on to learn lots of things for the computer until I understand [the] computer.” And Amahle Mushwana cannot put into words what she learned regarding the technical devices but she stresses that she was sensitised regarding technology, saying: “My eyes are open now.” Seeing the workshop as a qualification through which the participants might get a different job and quit sex work, the seminar for them becomes the hope to get out of prostitution.

But the ambition of the sex workers to become qualified for other jobs must be seen critically: Their use of the computer and the World Wide Web remains very basic and most of the participants still need a lot of support from the trainers regarding the technical devices through the end of the five-day seminar. Therefore, the workshop cannot be seen as a qualification seminar providing the women with skills for different jobs. The empowerment the participants experience is more of a psychological one – the workshop does not change their living condition or situation.

Conclusion: Digital Storytelling – Dimensions of Empowerment

The sex workers participating in the seminar experience different momentums of empowerment. They describe the workshop setting as a safe place which allows them to talk about their experiences among like-minded people. The storytelling itself is relieving and liberating for them. It is relieving as they may openly talk about their experiences as sex workers – a situation which is uncommon for them as they usually hide their jobs in fear of discrimination and stigmatization; this openness provokes a feeling of liberation. One woman actually feels that, within the workshop context, she is outside South Africa.

But at the same time, the participants are very much aware of their situation in South Africa. Therefore, they also use their digital stories to, on the one hand, warn others not to go into sex work, while on the other hand they use their films to address the South African government and president and demand an improvement of their situation. For the sex workers, improvement would mainly be decriminalization. Moreover, the women hope that by publishing their stories, they will receive help.

Many women participate because they want to learn how to use computers and the Internet, and they hope that with this knowledge, they would become qualified for jobs outside prostitution. Even though the realisation of this hope is unrealistic, as the five-day workshop does not provide comprehensive computer training but is more of a “first contact” experience, the aforementioned dimensions of empowerment remain.

The empowerment perceived by the participants does not change their job situation and their role as sex workers. But it changes their identities as sex workers, as they gain in self-esteem through the experience of solidarity and being taken seriously. Even though the study I conducted does not allow a long-term analysis, as I did not follow my interview partners as they went back to their jobs, it can be stated that the women are empowered at least for the duration of the workshop.

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 Mudiwa Kaleni, 24 February 2010

All interviews were conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa. The names of the participants have been changed for their protection.