



# Storytelling Circle

**Overview:** This activity uses storytelling as a process of empowerment in which participants' voices and experiences are affirmed and we build community and solidarity. It is also an introduction to listening and documenting skills.

**Purpose:** This activity enables participants to experience the power of storytelling in amplifying voices and building connections among those often not heard.

While initially developed to support women's storytelling and empowerment, it can be adapted for any group whose stories are distorted, unheard or undervalued. As part of our feminist movement building, we need to challenge the kinds of stories that are told about us and refuse to be silenced. For instance, in many cases, women's voices and experiences are not visible, and it is very rare to hear women telling their own stories. One way to challenge this is to produce women's stories that put women's experiences and perspectives front and centre. The more women's stories are told and shared, the more it will become the norm that women's stories are important and valuable

For any group that is marginalized and whose stories are not heard or valued, storytelling is an effective way for people to empower themselves by sharing their own stories in place of the stories told about them. It also allows us to build community and solidarity in our organisations and movements – as we hear each other's experiences and understand better how we can learn from and relate to one another in the fight for justice. The more women's stories are told and shared, the more it will become the norm that women's stories are important and valuable. By telling our stories, we affirm their importance and create more space for others to tell theirs.

**Time:** 3 – 4 hours

**Overview:** Adapted by JASS Southern Africa

**Materials:**

- Pen, paper for all participants
- Chairs or pillows for storytelling circle





## Process:

**Introduction:** (Adapt as needed for your group or context).

Storytelling employs an important tool of feminist knowledge: oral *herstory*. Herstory processes go to the heart of women's silence and voice given patriarchy playing out in women's lives. A vital part of storytelling for feminist movement building is about building voice of individual women and the collective. Stories are collected using different methods that allow women to speak to their experiences in a safe and empowered environment. Whether women do this through writing or by speech, capturing women's own words, the ways in which they speak to *their experiences* is important.

*Facilitator Note: In order to capture women's words, it is important to listen without judgement (even if you completely disagree!) and without interpreting (based on your feelings and experience) what women say. Remember your role is to capture 'her story' not your story! The process of storytelling involves cultivating a degree of trust and accountability with the understanding that it is not an exploitative act. Telling a story is about connecting with each other and learning.*

## In plenary:

### Why do we tell stories?

1. They are a fundamental part of movement building and allow people to connect on common issues that affect them.
2. To amplify women's voices, and put into practise the principle that women's stories *do* matter, women's experiences are important and critical towards building sustained and effective change.

### STEP 1: Telling our stories

Introduce Process:

- Each of you has a story to tell and in the next exercise we want to capture some of these stories, at the same time as we use this as an opportunity to practice listening and documenting her stories. Unfortunately, in the time we have we will only be able to get stories from half the group as the other half will be listening and documenting.
- Have them practice a storytelling methodology in pairs. One will be the storyteller, the other will listen carefully and document the story through note taking. Use the guide to help the teller tell her story.



### Guiding questions/statements:

- *What is in my heart right now?*
- *Who I am today?*
- *I realised that life was different for me as a woman or girl when...*
- *The story I want to share is...*
- *I used my power within when... (or if not familiar with terms – what did I do to change the situation?)*

### Step 2: Reflecting on the experience:

- How did those telling their stories feel? Did you feel safe, supported?
- How did those listening feel? Were you moved? Were you able to resist intervening with your own experiences?
- What did listeners have to do to ensure they were supporting the teller?
- How would we make the space 'safe'?
- What did you have to do in order to document/ take notes?
- What was missing? What did you need to hear more of? Was sufficient context given to help someone outside of the group to understand the story?

### Facilitator ensures the following points covered:

- This is a limited process, ideally everyone should have adequate time to tell their whole story (what is in their heart right now), time for listening.
- What happens next: weaving the stories together: collective analysis, production of herstories/our stories (what form, for what purpose?).
- Importance and ethics of documentation, fact checking with storyteller.