

# Writers and teachers as agents of social change

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## Abstract

Despite idealistic intentions, teachers at all levels and in most subjects are often accused of fostering Western hegemony and linguistic imperialism. However, a unique writing project in the southern African country of Namibia demonstrates that teachers can become agents of social change. One part of this project is an anthology of writings by indigenous women about their struggles with HIV and AIDS. Because AIDS has become a pandemic, now afflicting more than 35 million people worldwide, this anthology from Namibia, produced by the Women's Leadership Centre, provides both a local and global (or "glocal") orientation to the problem. It demonstrates the value of English in promoting health and human rights issues and more generally of empowering marginalized populations. It is also a supreme example of auto-ethnography, an account of one's own experiences as grounded in and reflecting a culture, which has become a cutting-edge form of qualitative research. This paper explains how this "grass roots" writing project works and how to replicate it and develop relevant curriculum in other settings. A Reading Guide and high school curriculum have already been created, providing authentic, contextualized, and culturally appropriate materials for consciousness-raising activities focusing on reader response to social concerns, as well as for a typical language lesson.

## Introduction

Despite their idealistic intentions to promote "international understanding", teachers are often accused of fostering Western hegemony and linguistic imperialism, particularly in developing countries (Canagarajah, 2002). Because the ruling elite in such countries usually speaks English, teachers of English are seen as supporting the status quo and pressuring disenfranchised people to give up their native languages and cultures in an effort to "better" themselves. However, a unique writing project in the southern African country of Namibia demonstrates that teachers of all kinds can become agents of social change. One part of this project is an anthology of writings by indigenous women about their struggles with HIV and AIDS. Because AIDS has become a pandemic, now afflicting more than 35 million people worldwide ("Namibia", 2009), this anthology from Namibia provides both a local and global (or "glocal") orientation to the problem. It provides sorely needed consciousness-raising for this dread disease and more generally empowers marginalized populations. At the same time it also demonstrates the value of English in publicizing health and human rights issues and how teachers can assist in this process.

## Social and political contexts

The sociopolitical context of Namibia is a paradox because on the one hand, it has national legislation protecting women's rights in its Constitution of 1990, including statements that Namibia is a "democratic... State securing to all our citizens justice, liberty, equality and

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fraternity,” and that “women in Namibia have traditionally suffered special discrimination and... need [now] to play a full, equal role in the life of the nation” (Preamble, Article 6). On the other hand, however, Namibia remains one of the most violent and unequal societies in the world, with an “apparent increase in violence since Independence,” according to the Deputy Minister of Education, Becky Ndjoze-Ojo (qtd. in /Khaxas, 2005, p. xiii). This view is confirmed by an NGO report in 2006 of the “continuous and shocking escalation of violence against women and girls in Namibian society” (/Khaxas, p. 37).

The country is plagued with high rates of HIV/AIDS, abusive cultural practices, great poverty, social exclusion, poor health care, corruption, and political hegemony. One writer has lamented Namibia’s “triple C legacy:” Custom, which includes bride purchasing, forced marriage, genital mutilation, multiple concurrent sex partners and wives, and frequent rape of females of all ages; Colonialism, which institutionalized inequality based not only on gender, but also race, ethnicity, and wealth; and Capitalism, which treats everything, including women, as commodities (/Khaxas, 2005, p. ix-x). All such abuses are documented in the Centre’s recently published *Violence is not our culture* (2011), focusing on the impoverished Caprivi region in northeast Namibia.

Namibia is hardly alone, however, in this egregious reputation among developing countries. Strong evidence supports the existence of similar abuses of women and girls all across Africa in “pernicious continuities between colonial, nationalist, and postcolonial systems,” according to feminist researcher Amina Mama (2001, p. 265). The Southern African Medical Research Council has reported that “rape has become normalized as a feature of masculine identity in a society that has emerged from years of oppression,” with 42% of surveyed males confessing to violence with an intimate partner, and 9 % confessing to gang rape” (“Africa”, February 2, 2009). A recent news report claims 48 women in the Congo are raped every hour! (“Congo’s Rate”, May 12, 2011, p. A2). The current bestseller, *Half the sky*, focuses on the oppression of women throughout the world, particularly in developing countries (Kristof & WuDunn, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, in such contexts, HIV/AIDS has reached epidemic proportions, with a 20% infection rate for most of southern Africa, and nearly 47% in the Caprivi region in northeast Namibia, with little change in numbers despite billions of dollars for education and treatment from organisations such as PEPFAR, Project Hope, and the Millennium Challenge. From these grim statistics one can only conclude that such programs have been a resounding failure. Surprising, perhaps, is the gender distribution for HIV/AIDS: 62% for women vs. 38% for men. Thus the disease overwhelmingly victimizes women. One Namibian writer has poignantly written: “Why do you accuse me?/ i am not the virus/ why are you fighting me? /I am not the disease/ can’t you see me? /I am your mother, your daughter.../ don’t you recognize me?” (/Khaxas, 2005, p. 304).

### **Women’s Leadership Centre**

To temper this dangerously oppressive climate in Namibia, the non-profit Women’s Leadership Centre (WLC) was founded in 2004 with the primary purpose of fostering women’s writings as a means of female consciousness-raising, empowerment, creative expression, and resistance to male-dominated culture. It focuses on the most marginalized Namibian women, such as those affected by HIV/AIDS, young women and girls, sex workers, rural women, disabled women, lesbians, and the impoverished. The premise of the WLC is that when women write about their lives, their writing becomes a uniquely political expression of resistance, transformation, and celebration.

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To date the Centre has published two books, a third is in press, and a fourth is in the planning stages. Its first book, *Between yesterday and tomorrow* (Khaxas, 2005), written by Namibian women, is an anthology of poems, stories, and essays about gender inequality, which still exists just as much today as when the Namibia gained its independence more than twenty years ago. The third volume, *Moments of courage* (in press), highlights courageous acts in the context of women's oppression, whether the threat is physical or psychological, showing many ways of "braving hyenas and lions in order to take care of oneself and one's family." The fourth anthology will deal with the role of Christianity in the oppression of Namibian women.

The focus of this report is the second anthology, *We must choose life: Writings by Namibian women on culture, violence, HIV and AIDS* (Khaxas, 2008) which puts faces into the bleak AIDS landscape in Namibia, providing a human dimension to the bureaucratic facts and figures. It is now available through Amazon Books and comprises 17 overlapping sections about the impact of AIDS on Namibian women, reactions to AIDS diagnoses, cultural issues and sexual violence, poverty and AIDS, and ignorance and HIV/AIDS. The anthology is complemented by book of photographs snapped mostly by the women themselves with disposable cameras.

The anthology also gives an epiphany of the root cause of the AIDS pandemic: not lack of education, but the presence of male-dominated culture, which BOTH genders are programmed to accept, both believing that "a respected woman is quiet, obedient, hard-working, and married" (Khaxas, 2008, p. xix). Traditional cultural practices in Namibia impact people's behavior far more than educational leaflets or even Constitutional "guarantees" of human rights and gender equality. As one poet puts it, "Infidelity is rooted in culture/ know that dead people have no culture/ therefore a culture has no meaning/ if it drives people to death..." (Khaxas, 2008, p. 299). Apparently, "if one part of society is sick, the whole society is sick, and if one half of the society is treated without respect and freedom, the whole society remains oppressed and disempowered," according to Namibia's Deputy Minister of Education (qtd. in Khaxas, 2008, p. xv).

The Women's Leadership Centre anthologies have been created through the following six steps: advertising, leader training, writing workshops, submissions and editing, publication, and dissemination.

To explain in more detail, submissions for the two published books were solicited through 20,000 flyers distributed throughout the country, including the major newspapers, *The Namibian*, *New Era*, and *Republikein*, followed by four writing-training workshops in the capital city of Windhoek for 150 participants, who then conducted more than fifty regional workshops. Workshops were part group therapy and part writing instruction. As the U.S. State Department's English Language Fellow to Namibia for 2008, I had the privilege of participating in several of these. Submissions could also be sent directly to the Centre. From nearly 500 submissions for each volume, 89 were published in *Between yesterday and tomorrow*, and nearly 150 in *We must choose life*, many by first-time writers. Some submissions were translated for non-English speakers, and some were also transcribed for illiterate women.

Many women had to be coached to overcome their objections that writing requires computers and printers, library access, education, and social mobility, and that it interferes with family responsibilities and cultural expectations for women to be shy and quiet. Finally, though, the women came to see writing as a top priority because "through writing

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we are standing up for our rights and making a case against the abuse of women,” and “we are writing for our daughters, and to bring about changes in our cultures and traditions” (/Khaxas, 2005, p. xxiii-xxiv). One poet claims in “My Friend, My Pen” that “writing is the most important thing...” Another eloquently states (/Khaxas, 2008, p. 53):

In the word of Aids/ men and women are equal/ Wake up women/ the old days of total obedience are gone/ forget about your culture/ focus on saving yourself/ Your life counts!/ Women, there are goals to achieve/ dreams to turn into reality/writing is our first priority/ We must choose life/ reject the belief that men/ decide on our fate/ In the world of Aids/ men and women are equal/ Choose yourself/ Choose life!”

The title for the anthology was taken from this poem.

### **Writers as agents of social change**

The broader benefits of this type of indigenous writing project are several. From a sociopolitical standpoint, the unique contribution of the Centre’s publications is that they empower marginalized people to tell their story and advocate for social justice by using “writing as resistance” to reject the status quo and thereby change their world. In so doing, the books can become important agents of social change for writer and reader alike. They provide new perspective on the “plurality of discourses” and “writing from the periphery” (Canagarajah’s terms, 2002), helping achieve cultural appropriation and transformation. Unlike academic writers, these women are using English to write within their culture and for their culture in order to resist and transform it—not to join some hegemonic “center”.

Although some have challenged the Centre’s work, saying that it is not relevant for African women or that economic development and legal reform are more important, a strong case can be made that the process of empowering women through creative literature and its ability to highlight crucial social problems while envisioning better ways of living is just as necessary to Namibia’s overall development as roads and wells and health care. The same could surely be said of other developing countries. In the words of Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General (cited in Project Inspire, 2011), “No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity as the empowerment of women”, who then become victors, not just victims, and solutions, not just problems.

In addition to advocating, the Women’s Leadership Centre publications also profoundly educate—both writers and readers. They are supreme examples of auto-ethnography, an account of one’s own experiences as grounded in and reflecting a culture, which has become a cutting-edge form of qualitative research—on AIDS or any other topic. As such, they enable marginalized people to “become writers” in their own right, realizing that writing is not something that only white or educated people do. This is a radical insight, given that African women have been the objects of study and scrutiny mainly by others, rarely seeing the outcomes of the information they provided. Of course the anthologies are also gold mines of qualitative data for outside researchers and other readers. Additionally, the penned products in these anthologies may be profoundly shattering, but they are also surprisingly eloquent and stingingly heartfelt, thus rising to the level of literary art. Most of all, they educate about the resiliency of the human spirit, for along with the pain, the reader also experiences the optimism, the energy, and the power of Namibian women.

A recent example of both the advocacy and education that may have been fostered in part by the Women’s Leadership Centre work is the controversy surrounding the Olufuko bridal initiation ceremony in the northern region of the country (“Namibia”, August 24, 2012, p. A1), in which girls in their mid-teens undergo seven “steps” to become

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“prospective brides.” The controversy over whether this ceremony, now revived for the first time in eighty years, demeans or promotes young women has been covered in all the major Namibian newspapers. Some groups, such as Namrights, charge that the ceremony is “discriminatory and degrading against girls” (“Namibia”, August 24, 2012, p. A1). The Lutheran Church and other religious groups say it is unchristian. However, the sponsoring Owambo tribes and others argue that because the girls are not coerced to participate, and they are no longer tested for virginity, the ceremony reflects modern, more respectful cultural norms. Namibian Founding President Sam Nujoma himself opened the Olufuko Festival, of which the ceremony was part. Perhaps some of the participants in this controversy are writers and readers of the Women’s Leadership anthologies. As members of the fourth estate, the newspapers themselves also deserve credit for raising consciousness of this and other human rights issues in Namibia.

### **Curriculum**

From a teaching perspective, the two published books provide scarce but desperately needed authentic, contextualized, and culturally appropriate materials that can be used in settings lacking computers or even textbooks, as is the case in much of Africa. One curriculum, already used in schools and women’s groups throughout Namibia, is the *Women’s voices: Reading guide* (2009), which provides step-by-step instructions for group facilitators with no teaching experience. The steps are:

- 1) Choose a story of interest,
- 2) Read the story to yourself (to try to understand it),
- 3) Reflect on your first impressions of words and images,
- 4) Consider the context, structure, and author of the story,
- 5) Relate story to your own lives, community, town, and country,
- 6) Look for deeper meaning about gender roles,
- 7) Consider how a man might interpret the story,
- 8) Practise reading the story to your group (for illiterate group members),

Group discussion guidelines include sequential steps in reading the story or poem for comprehension, feeling the emotional content, understanding the cultural issues, relating them to one’s own life, and deciding on some kind of advocacy or action. The five themes covered in both published anthologies include violence against women, wife inheritance, poverty and child raising, forced marriage, and ignorance and HIV. Each theme is represented by at least one main selection (a story, poem, or drama) and by two other selections with different perspectives. The approach of this Reading Guide thus pivots on reader response.

Inside the classroom, the Women’s Leadership anthologies provide invaluable authentic materials for courses in current affairs, cultural history, women’s studies, English language, and even literature. With classroom contexts in mind, a twenty-hour curriculum has been developed for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) high school and adult students with two sets of goals (Broekhoff, 2009), focusing on reader response as well as on language development. Both sets of goals have cognitive and affective components. The first goals are to motivate students to seek gender equality and AIDS prevention through exposure to authentic creative expressions of Namibian women, while at the same time encouraging them to become more empathetic towards AIDS sufferers and more analytical about cultural issues. Major themes for the curriculum based on *We must choose life* revolve around the impact of HIV/AIDS on Namibian society, reactions to HIV/AIDS in oneself and others, cultural issues, and choices and solutions.

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The second goal set is to promote “best practices” language teaching, particularly as embodied in the U.S. State Department’s *Shaping the way we teach English* (Opp-Beckman & Klinghammer, 2006), now used worldwide, including integrated practice of all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), multiple learning modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), use of drama techniques, task-based small and large group work, and various learner assessments.

### **Teachers as agents of social change**

As these descriptions of the anthologies and teaching curricula suggest, teachers can function as social reformers when they promote human rights among marginalized populations. This reformer role provides a powerful counter-argument to the all-too-frequent claim that most teachers merely defend the social status quo or promote linguistic imperialism. Instead, with projects such as this one, teachers can become agents of social change by encouraging the disempowered to speak from the periphery and thereby gain strength both there and within the dominant centers of power (Canagarajah, 2002).

There are two ways that teachers can become social change agents, as gleaned from my experience with the Women’s Leadership Centre. First, they can assist with the creation and dissemination of “writing from the periphery” by participating in pre- and post-publication publicity, in facilitating the writing workshops themselves, and in selecting and editing submissions. Regarding publicity, teachers can make presentations both nationally and internationally about the work of the Women’s Leadership Centre, as I have done. They also can arrange for digital publication, so the books can reach a wider audience. *We must choose life* has been available as a Kindle e-book for more than a year through Amazon.com.

In writing workshops, teachers from a variety of disciplines can help create a sense of voice and community and thereby educate both the writers themselves and their readers. A few caveats are in order, however. Because the oppression of women or of any other group is a sensitive topic, a bond of trust between writer and teacher is vital here. In fact, “facilitator” is probably a better word than “teacher” for a writing workshop leader. Trust can usually be better created by local leadership than by “do-gooders” from outside; in any case, local support is essential. In my own situation, I was welcomed to participate and even lead writing workshops in Namibia’s capital of Windhoek, the only major city, but I was not asked to attend the workshops in the rural north of the country because most of these women have never met someone from outside their villages.

The second way teachers can function as social reformers is by using writing from the periphery in their ESOL lesson plans for adults or high school students. Such writing, as stated previously, is authentic, contextualized, and culturally appropriate, and as such, it is far more relevant to the lives of Namibians than for example, a history of Bismarck’s conquests or Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, a recent selection for the country’s high school juniors by the Namibian Ministry of Education (N.E.T.A., 2008). The poems, stories, and essays in the Women’s Leadership anthologies lend themselves not only to thematic, consciousness-raising activities focusing on reader response to social concerns, but also to the structural and language activities of a typical English lesson.

Although the WLC publications focus on the oppression of women in Namibia, this kind of “grass roots” writing project can be replicated in a variety of settings involving marginalized people worldwide. Issues can be diverse, pivoting on religion, ethnicity, politics, racism, and poverty, as well as women’s oppression and AIDS. Materials produced



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from such projects can be used in a variety of educational settings, as illustrated by the two teaching units described above. Course content can also be diverse, using a wealth of primary materials.

#### **Conclusion**

The work of the Women's Leadership Centre in Namibia demonstrates that social and cultural change can be created within a society, non-violently, by those most needing the change, illustrating the old adage, "The pen is mightier than the sword". Much in the indigenous Namibian cultures is a tribute to their humanity and achievements, but there is also a persistent undercurrent that has traditionally brutalized women. The Centre publication, *Violence is not our culture* (2011) tries to isolate and expose these harmful cultural practices, particularly in the Caprivi region, but also throughout Namibia. Social change cannot come from executive fiat or even from the inspiring rhetoric of the Namibian Constitution (1990), which guarantees full gender equality while acknowledging that women have been victims of discrimination in the past. The WLC's first anthology, *Between yesterday and tomorrow* (Khaxas, 2005), glaringly reveals the discrepancy between this rhetoric and the reality for nearly all Namibian women, more than twenty years after the Constitution was written. Social change also cannot come from information alone, as witnessed by the copious AIDS education programs throughout Namibia contrasted with the devastation from AIDS described in *We must choose life* (Khaxas, 2008).

Social change instead must come from consciousness-raising and a reorientation of emotional perspective, crystallized in the new anthology, *Moments of courage* (in press), which describes individual women's resistance to incidents of male domination. Thus the anthologies of the Women's Leadership Centre, written both by and about the women themselves, are the perfect catalysts for the social and cultural change that Namibia still so desperately needs. By writing about their experiences living in a male-dominated society, marginalized Namibian women are not only raising cognitive and emotional awareness among themselves and their readers. They are also finding a community voice that empowers them and creates respect throughout society. The very recent controversy over the Olufuko bridal initiation ceremony ("Namibia", August 24, 2012, p. A) attests to heightened awareness of this cultural misogyny. Such awareness may be attributed in part to the work of the Women's Leadership Centre.

In addition to social change created by the writers themselves, the second major point of this paper regards the pivotal role of teachers in accelerating change by helping to create and disseminate these auto-ethnographies. Teachers can conduct workshops for any group of people to assist them in finding their "voice" and creating authentic materials. Many educators complain about the dearth of relevant African literature for teaching purposes. The WLC books help fill this gap. Teachers can publicize the auto-ethnographies online and at teacher conferences. Lastly, they can use these materials in their curricula and lesson plans for social studies, women's studies, cultural history, English language, or literature courses and seminars.

Through the kind of project described here, embodied in the work of the Women's Leadership Centre, both writers and teachers of all types can function as agents of social change, not perpetrators of the status quo.

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