

## 14. Why Stories Matter for Representation, Action, and Collectivization

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### Abstract

In this essay, we reflect on our storytelling experiences and processes at FemLab and focus on what storytelling can achieve for a project that operates within a similar framework. We explore the role of stories as devices to document concepts, ideas, and experiences, and argue for its importance to build not just agency, but also present different imaginations and vocabularies of people's lived realities. Through an examination of different project outputs, we reflect upon the method of storytelling, thinking of it as a process, and a mechanism through which these different perspectives are documented, while at the same time, reflecting on its meaning for us as storytellers and translators of stories.

**Keywords:** storytelling, legal design, accessibility, activism

### Introduction

Across different sites of work, research at FemLab has brought to attention the life of workers in the platform economy. This includes situations where algorithms are managing and controlling the ways in which workers respond to requests, reviews, and feedback from customers (Bansal 2020), cases where platforms are continuously preventing workers from being visible by determining their place of work, as well as their work timings (Kommaraju 2021), and instances where workers are using social media to find support ecosystems. Each instance contains a complex set of characters, contexts, and emotions, and in this piece, we reflect on why an important component of the project is to find ways to tell stories about the project, and stories about the workers.

Stories give us ways to document and expand concepts. They are devices through which experiences can be shared, issues can be identified; and ways to interact and respond to a variety of situations (Bell 2019). Stories are important to construct an understanding of people, of places, and of contexts, as they offer narratives, counter narratives, and help to problematize linear understandings of issues (Sharma 2019).<sup>1</sup> Stories also have the potential to represent different points of views; they have the power to silence and make invisible the views of some, and thereby shape how people remember, acknowledge, and interact with different situations (Wånggren 2016).

Our area of concern regarding stories is how best to ensure that we can demystify information about how people work and exist within a legal framework of processes, laws, authorities, and rights (de Souza 2020a). This translates into addressing an information overload which is difficult to access, understand, and use for those who aren't experts in the subject area. This creates the premise for a design problem. One interpretation of working at the intersection of law and design is to make this information accessible and usable for its diverse users.

Storytelling is a method that facilitates this design process; it delivers the information that has a place in everyday life in a relatable format (Cavarero 2000). The nature of information and its users render themselves to the process of storytelling.

At Justice Adda,<sup>2</sup> a law and design social venture, we have worked with a variety of information—laws, procedures, and particular acts—which exists for every person, which makes it a large, diverse group of people. We are dealing with different age groups, social backgrounds, educational qualifications, access to technology, awareness, and so on. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to speak to all these people with one designed output. Storytelling cuts across these differences. The information relates to experiences and situations, hypothetical and real, which make for great stories. In this essay, we reflect on the method of storytelling, thinking of it as a process and a mechanism through which these different perspectives are documented, while at the same time, reflecting on its meaning for us as storytellers and translators of stories. We do this through examining examples from our own work at Justice Adda and through the work we have done at FemLab.

1 <https://narrativearts.org/story-guide/>

2 <https://www.justiceadda.com/>

## Stories Matter Because Voices Matter

FemLab looks at ecologies of women working in different sectors such as salons, construction, sanitation, ride-hailing, and artisanal work (Arora and Raman 2020). Over the past two years, researchers from the team have been working across field sites in India and Bangladesh to understand the lived realities of women workers. The field notes, interviews, observations, and analyses form the basis for the stories that we have sought to represent and translate, and the characters, situations, and challenges are real, and convey the different ways in which workers' lives have had to deal with upheavals, and successes within their sectors. The stories have different audiences—academia, workers, platform companies, and the general population—which may be indirectly influencing the work such as customers and the government.

Stories speak to all these audiences. They allow us to share more than just a synthesis of information. In a project that hopes to bring to the fore ways of working that are often ignored, storytelling allows us to break through and present the reality in not just its essence, but in its multi-dimensional reality—which includes the who, where, how, why and what.

Stories are experiences. For instance, in the process of working on a story about bangle makers, it became important to think about the implications of the story (Raman 2021). When we share the process of making a bangle in the voice of the bangle maker, recording the challenges, the different parts played by her family, the aspirations, the reasons for doing it, and present it in a visual animation, it does two things. One, it makes the experience representative and relatable. It aims to make it real for those who had no idea about the struggles and existences of the bangle maker, but it also aims to provide agency such that the story is told by the bangle maker through our work as a medium (Parvin 2018). Second, an animation provides a lot of visual information, it gives the bangle maker a face, it depicts where she lives, what she makes, and captures the imagination of our viewers in more ways than one. It depicts her reality and her context.

## The Audience of a Story and Their Role in Its Design

In the use of storytelling, a key consideration is who is the story for. Is it a story that is meant to raise awareness about a particular issue?<sup>3</sup> Is it a story

3 In our project “Covid-19 and the Constitution,” we created an interactive timeline that documents law and policy responses to COVID-19 and places them in the context of Fundamental

to provide an alternative narrative to the prevailing dominant story?<sup>4</sup> Is it a story meant to give feedback to the groups who are represented in the story to be tools for action within those groups? These are not mutually exclusive, and oftentimes, stories have multiple functions and overlapping audiences.

In thinking about the different potential audiences for a story, we are guided by principles from a design justice framework. This framework “rethinks design processes, centres people who are normally marginalized by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our communities face.”<sup>5</sup>

For instance, in reimagining the contractual terms of a worker employed by a platform that provides services for salon work, we discussed that the starting point of the contract rather than being from the standpoint of the existing legal document of the company, needed to be in terms of the ways in which the workers themselves articulated and understood their rights and entitlements (de Souza 2020b). As a result, the understanding of rights in this context, and allied concepts of justice, fairness, grievance, were formulated keeping in mind the lived reality of the worker, and how the dispute emerged in their context (Merry and Levitt 2017).

Doing so was deliberate, keeping in mind the audience for the story. In this case, the workers were not just receptors of information, but active participants in its design, and life thereafter.

## The Matter of Different Stories and Different Reactions

The stories we have told at FemLab are different in nature (de Souza and Gupta 2021). There are stories about values and principles that underpin the framing of the project, there are stories about things, which are summaries of ideas and contexts, documentations of conversations, snippets of the lives of workers, and statements of fact. There are also stories about advocacy, about ideal states of being, about calls for action, and about building communities.

Rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution: <https://www.justiceadda.com/covid19andthe-constitution>. For more, see Divan et al. 2022.

4 We organized an online conference on “Plural Ideas of Justice: Stories, Narratives and Experiences from India.” The conference explored ideas of justice that emerge from different and diverse methods of conflict resolutions. This included but was not limited to conflict resolution practices, seeking justice through digital platforms or in the form of protests or through community-based forums such as collectives, religious tribunals, etc. See <https://www.justiceadda.com/conferenceoutputs> for more.

5 “Read the Principles.” <https://designjustice.org/read-the-principles>

Stories deliver an “arc” (Lupton 2017)—they create an experience for the user which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It makes the information believable and contextual. But what happens afterwards? There are layered objectives that we as designers hope to achieve from this exercise. The first step is creating access to information. The next step is solidarity and support, where we hope users of this information will become agents that will share the outputs with their circles. Beyond this is advocacy; where stories can change ways of thinking and users actively voice their opinions on the issue shared. Last but not the least, is collectivizing, where users organize themselves and take the dialogue forward; they discuss and become a part of the larger conversation.

At Justice Adda, how information becomes a story is a process. Sometimes the stories, their audience, and hence their formats are apparent, sometimes not so much. For example, we conducted a workshop with the FemLab team to understand our interpretations of feminist collectives. This was intended to value, share, and borrow from our experiences and understandings and not limit ourselves to the literature we were reviewing. While this workshop could be limited to the FemLab team, we decided to share the findings and its mechanics with those who may be interested to find out more (de Souza and Gupta 2021). The team’s responses were influenced by the stories they heard in the field. We wanted to create outputs that would allow other interested parties to be able to share their stories, understanding, and interpretation of feminist collectives. This led to the development of workshop templates which can be printed and used by individuals and groups to conduct a similar workshop.

Different stories provoke different emotions. For instance, in our story about women cab drivers, the story is driven by a need to rethink stereotypes about the lives of women drivers, and provide an understanding of their conceptions of freedom, safety, independence (Bansal 2021). In the story about the abandoned public toilet, we have explored the importance of locating a distinction between an intervention and its actual use, thereby highlighting the importance of design not being abstract but situated in nature (Mehta 2021). Translating information into visual storytelling outputs for platforms like Instagram, allows users to easily share this information with their virtual friends, show support through likes and shares, and create new channels and hashtags to collectivize and form new communities.

For a project like FemLab, where there is immense scope for action, our outputs aim to reflect this spirit. Going through field notes from research with partners of an online salon service, we hope the stories convey the realities that were revealed in those interviews, documenting narratives

that are otherwise not as prominent in mainstream reportage of the nature of work. We were curious in how the users of this platform will interpret these narratives and participate in this conversation. We chose to present this as an animation so we could take the users on the journey of the partner and relate to their lives. Following the same taxonomy, the hope was that the users can at least be fully aware of the situation and then do what they deem appropriate with it. It was important that the narrative could reveal the effect little things, like—giving ratings, giving the correct and detailed address, not cancelling appointments—could have on the life of the person on the receiving end. We were hoping that storytelling would evoke empathy and, in turn, action.

We have realized in our experience with designing storytelling outputs, the importance and the influence exerted by the decision of where the outputs will be published. The place of storytelling defines how the story will be told and who will read it. For example, the Graphic Law Library<sup>6</sup> which we worked on was primarily published on Instagram and our website. This influenced its design—the shape of each individual post, the font size, the balance of visuals with words, the maximum of ten images per topic, and the language the posts were in. The posts were accessed largely by English-speaking users of Instagram, some of whom had no awareness of the content we were sharing and some who found it useful for their audiences which were not all on Instagram themselves. We made the square Instagram posts available as downloadable PDFs for the latter so that they could print these and share.

For FemLab, the storytelling outputs are shared on multiple platforms to reach different audiences. We wanted to particularly reach audiences which may not be used to reading a research paper. Therefore, these outputs are published on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to invite different groups into the research. Additionally, we see publishing these stories as an opportunity to subvert these channels to present stories and voices that may, in the normal course, never find a home on these platforms.

## As Storytellers and Translators

In terms of our positionality, building stories as a collaborator with FemLab required being conscious that we were sometimes two steps removed from where the story emerged. We worked with inputs based on field research

6 <https://www.justiceadda.com/graphiclawlibrary>

by academics, who themselves were documenting and interpreting their own field experiences. In doing so, we were conscious that our work already had a few layers of translation. To ensure that it remained accurate, and representative of the voices we sought to share, we built the stories as iterative designs. Our designs were tentative in the sense that we provided our interpretation of the data but shared it back with the researcher who then shared it within their field site, to check if the work was useful, meaningful, and usable. Doing so, we hoped to build a reflexivity to our work, such that as storytellers, translators, and interpreters, we ensured that the agency of the story was co-produced and co-designed (Steen 2013).

While storytelling outputs like animations and infographics can be shared on platforms, these outputs also hold the potential to become tools for our stakeholders who hope to collectivize and organize themselves, to create support for one another. As much as the movement gains from support by outsiders, it can only sustain and grow when it has support from those in the same vein. Storytelling humanizes information and helps in communicating complex, entangled issues effectively (de Souza 2021c). For FemLab, we were conscious in ensuring how the stories we told became effective tools that could be shared on WhatsApp groups, as well as printouts that would facilitate in collectivizing the disparate voices of women workers in different sectors.

Therefore, in the different stories in the project, a dilemma we sometimes faced was how to ensure that the outputs built an interactive element. In this process, in addition to demystification of legal information, we were also interested in finding ways to build engagement. The toolkit and visual contracts were designed to address these twin motivations.<sup>7</sup> At one level, they sought to de-jargonize the law by offering plain language and visual cues to break down complex patterns, while at another level, we introduced practical steps that a reader/user can employ to work through the document.

## Conclusion

In this essay, we have reflected on our storytelling experiences and processes at FemLab and focused on what storytelling can achieve for a project that operates within a similar framework. When making a case

7 Our data toolkit is an example of using interactive activities to make understanding the lifecycle of data more accessible. Justice Adda, "The Not So Secret Life of Your Data." For more, see <https://www.justiceadda.com/datarights>

for those on the margins, it takes more effort to make sure the voices are heard—when the stakeholders are many and issues complex, especially when what we are hoping to achieve is attention, support, care, and a change in status quo. Stories allow us to present the ignored narratives and new imaginaries convincingly, and represent realities contextually and holistically.

Across the different sectors of operation of FemLab, there is a collection of stories of resilience, protest, and strength. These stories are co-created into forms that are distributed on channels where they find new audiences, new contexts, and new representation. Storytelling invites them into this dialogue and makes them an active participant in the research by locating the story in relation to their lives. This is our hope in translating research into stories, because realizing you are a part of the story matters.

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