

ORAL HERSTORIES OF POWER

Creative Action Toolkit Guide



creative action
I N S T I T U T E

INTRODUCTION

Oral history is a process of collecting and documenting the first-hand stories and experiences of community members through conversations, interviews and other methods. Oral history allows us to learn about and highlight the perspectives of individuals who might not otherwise appear in the official history or cultural narrative.

Women have often been left out of historical records as history is often told by men and about men. We lose the profound contributions, values and wisdom that women weave into the fabric of our world. By lifting up the stories, perspectives, dreams, struggles and knowledge of women, we can challenge the social norms that accept

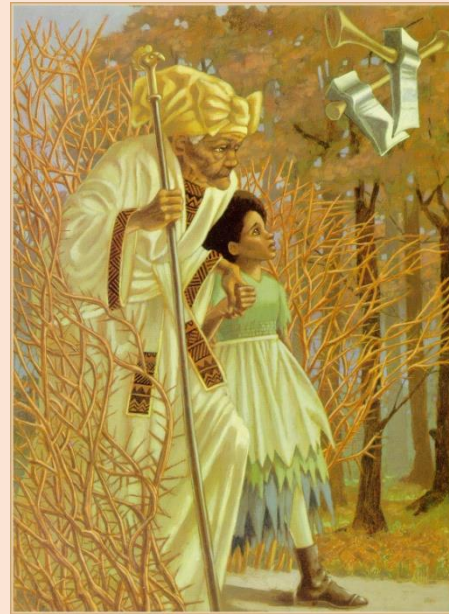


gender-based violence and the structures that uphold discrimination against women at all levels of society. Centering women shifts the landscape from narratives which normalize violence and conquest to highlight the social foundations of everyday life and relationship through women's work in agriculture, medicine, spirituality, food preparation, childrearing, pottery, weaving, music, dance, business, education, energy production, natural resource management and decision-making.

This Creative Action Toolkit provides some oral history tools and resources to recognize and highlight the value, contributions and wisdom of women in your community. They may be teachers, artists, mothers, business owners, healers, mentors, chiefs or any role model who you admire and respect. We hope that you will use these tools to document, listen, exhibit and rewrite the social narrative to center and celebrate the power of women!

GOALS FOR USE OF THIS TOOLKIT

- Understand the power of oral history to lift up women's stories and wisdom
- Develop research skills and learn techniques of oral history
- Create public exhibits and events to recognize and celebrate the value and contributions of women in your community
- Shift the cultural narrative to include women as central to community life and well-being
- Build the self-esteem and confidence of women and girls
- Strengthen relationships of support and solidarity between girls and women



The art of Leo and Diane Dillon

MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Notebooks and pens
- Audio or video recorder (*optional*)
- Camera (*optional*)
- Public space for exhibit
- Good questions and curiosity!

ACTION STEPS

Oral history is a creative research process with multiple steps along the way. You can start by facilitating classes or workshops to teach oral history techniques, then go out into the community to interview and document the stories of women and share what you find in a series of public exhibits or events!

FACILITATE AN ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

1. Determine your research goals for the oral history project.

Describe what oral history is and how it can serve as a tool to empower and celebrate women. Ask the group some of the following questions. This discussion can happen as a whole group, in pairs or in small groups who report back.

- What do you want to learn about?
- What would be important for your community to understand?
- Is there a particular issue you want to highlight?
- Do you want to highlight the value and worth of women's work in the home, which is often invisible and taken for granted?
- Do you want to understand and lift up the traditional knowledge and wisdom of women to protect the environment and address issues of climate change?
- Do you want to celebrate the power of women as leaders, teachers, role models and decision-makers?
- What else do you want to know about the women in your community?

2. Choose a woman or women who you want to interview. Who is the best storyteller or role model to communicate the message you want to convey? Who do you admire? Who do you want to know more about? It can be your mom, your grandmother, women elders, a nurse, your teacher, a local politician, artist or activist.

Contact potential interviewees, describe your project and ask if they are willing to participate. Make sure they understand the purpose of the project and how you intend to use their stories. Get their permission to share their stories and/or images. Set a date and a place for your interview. Try to make sure it is a quiet place where you can have some privacy.

3. Compile a list of topics and questions for an interview. What are the key topics you want to understand about this person's life and experience? What messages do you want to communicate? What do you want your audience to know?

Start with some lighter, less probing questions and then ask more in-depth questions. Try to ask open-ended questions rather than ones that will just elicit a “yes or no” answer.

Below is a list of possible questions. Start with the basics.

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- Where are you from? Where did you grow up?
- Do you have children? If so, how many?

Possible questions for women who work in the home:

- What are your different roles and responsibilities in the home? In the community?
- What tasks do you do every day?
- What time do you start working in the morning? What time do you stop?
- How do those tasks support the health and well-being of your family?
- How does your role as a woman and homemaker support the well-being of your community?
- If it weren't for the all the work you do in the home, what would happen to your family?
- Why is your work important?
- What challenges and obstacles do you face? How do you overcome them?
- What keeps you going when things are hard? What inspires you or gives you hope?
- What dreams do you have for yourself? For your children? For your community?
- What do you love most about your work? Would you share a moment of joy you've had through your work experience? What makes you feel fulfilled?

Questions about a women's role in sustainability and environmental protection:

- What environmental challenges do you face?
- What are you doing about it?
- What effects is global warming having in your community?
- What kind of changes have you seen in the last 10 years?
- How do you think climate change affects women differently or more severely?
- Can you share your knowledge about conserving and managing natural resources, like water, land or other natural resources?
- What traditional practices should we remember to live in a more sustainable way?
- How can women play a bigger role in guiding our community/society to address issues of climate change?

Questions about women's leadership and power:

- What do you do in the community?
- Can you describe your work and the value it has for our community?
- How did you get inspired to do what you do?
- How did you come to believe in yourself and your power?
- What do you think is the unique power of women?
- How can we empower ourselves and each other?
- What dreams do you have for our community?
- What kind of changes do you want to see?
- What goals do you have for yourself?
- What are you doing to achieve your goals and dreams?
- What challenges and obstacles have you faced? How did you overcome them?
- What advice would you share with your 15-year old self or a young woman who looks up to you?

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS¹

- 4. Gather your materials.** If possible, use an audio or video recorder so you can document their answers word-for-word. If you have access to a camera, take that along as well so you can take their photograph. If you don't have access to these, take a notebook and pen to capture their responses in a written format. It might help to conduct the interview with a partner so that one person can ask the questions and one person can take notes and capture their responses.
- 5. Practice!** Test your equipment beforehand and practice conducting interviews so that you are prepared and familiar with your questions.
- 6. Conduct your interview.** Make sure to remind your interviewee a day or so beforehand and be sure to set aside an hour or two for the interview.

Interview tips:

- Make sure they are comfortable. Have water on hand.
- Start each interview by documenting who, what, when and where you are interviewing.
- Listen actively and intently! Be a good listener. Use your body language such as smiling and nodding to indicate that you are interested.
- Follow your curiosity. Use your questions as a guide but allow for new ones to emerge. Remember this is a conversation, not an interrogation. You don't have to stick to the sequence on your paper.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Give your interviewee time to think.
- Start with easy, less probing questions first. Once you build some rapport, you can ask more personal or in-depth questions.
- Ask for specific examples if they make a general or vague statement and you want to know more. You might say, "Can you explain that in more detail?"

¹ http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

- You can re-ask and rephrase the same question several times to get all the information you need.
- Phrase your question so that you don't just get a yes or no answer. Rather than ask "Were you the first woman in your family to go to school?" Ask instead, "What was it like to be the first woman in your family to go to school?" Find out not only what the person did, but what they thought and felt about what she did.
- Always respect the limits of what your interviewee wants to share or not share. Don't force her to share anything she doesn't want to.
- When you are finished asking your questions, you can ask her if there is anything else that she would like to add.
- Take a photograph if you have a camera.
- Thank her for her time. Write a thank-you note after the interview and send it to her!

EXHIBIT YOUR RESEARCH

7. Design the public exhibit(s) or event(s).

- Decide where you want to exhibit the stories and/or photographs. Do you need wall space? Can it be exhibited outside?
- How will you display them? You can glue or tape them directly onto the wall, use frames or hang them on rope with clothes pins. Can you hand make frames from natural materials?
- Write and print out excerpts of their story or quotes to include in the exhibit.
- Can you create a book of these stories and photographs to print and share?
- Make a sign and write up a brief description of the project to include at the front or center of the exhibit.
- Are there other decorations you can use or display to make the exhibit beautiful? Perhaps you can also display arts and crafts that are made by women, such as bead jewelry, fabrics, weavings, pottery, etc.

- If you are organizing a public event for the exhibit, what are other cultural elements you can include? Some possible ideas to incorporate into a program:
 - Poetry by or about women. Choose poetry written by a woman or write poems of your own, inspired by the project!
 - Music by or about women. Invite women musicians to play live, choose a playlist of powerful music by women or write and sing your own songs, based on the stories or quotes you collected!
 - Make your own or perform traditional dances that celebrate women in some way.
 - Create theater skits or monologues that brings the stories and experiences of the women to life.
- Determine who will be the Master of Ceremonies and what key messages you want them to convey.
- Is this a traveling exhibit that you can display in multiple places throughout the community?
- Can you take it to local schools and make presentations about what you learned?
- Make sure to talk about how important it is to write and celebrate our own community histories, that include women and other marginalized groups who may have been erased or left out of the narrative.
- Ask the audience how we can more fully recognize and appreciate the women in our lives.

8. Invite the community to attend.

- What are the goals or outcomes you would like to achieve with your exhibit? Who is the target audience that will help you to accomplish these goals?
- Invite the women you are highlighting in the exhibit to attend. You can ask them to make a statement or tell their story as a part of the event.
- Invite local community members, chiefs and decision-makers in your community.
- Invite local schools and students.

- Who else needs to hear these stories?

9. Promote your event! What are the different ways to promote your event?

- Make flyers and distribute them.
- Share public announcements on the radio, at church, in schools, etc.
- Word of mouth. Go house to house and invite your neighbors.
- Use a megaphone and announce your event in the streets and markets!
- Write an article for your local newspaper.
- Share the event on social media.
- What other creative ideas do you have?

SCALE the IMPACT

- Be sure to take photos and videos to share widely through social media.
- Invite other communities and schools to host similar local projects throughout the country, the region, the continent and the globe!
- Invite the press, such as newspaper, radio or TV to come out and cover the exhibit and public event.
- Provide ongoing workshops and opportunities for the community to learn oral history techniques.
- Create a book or podcast out of these stories to share more widely!
- Get concrete about how you can change the narrative - ask the audience to make a pledge or commit to your desired outcomes! Ask all participants in your workshops and community events to sign a written pledge and/or take 1-2 CONCRETE ACTIONS to recognize the contributions, leadership or specific concerns of women. Make sure to write the pledge in a way that is relevant for your particular community, is realistic and can be measured for impact or success!

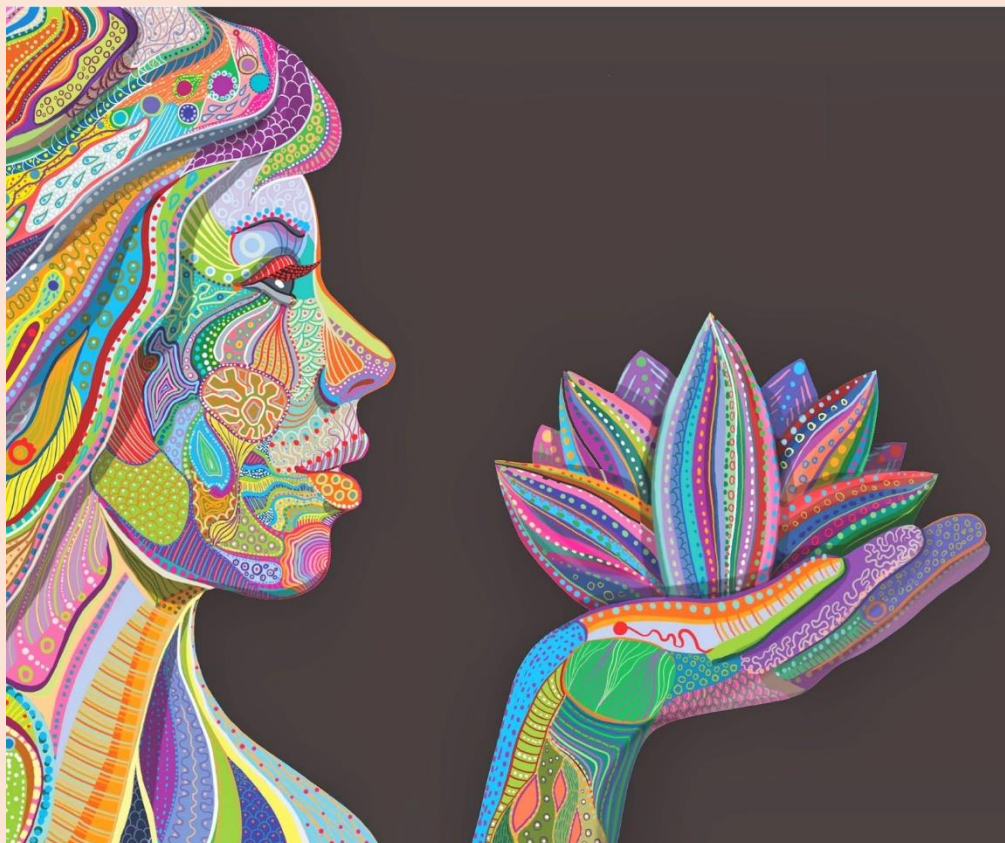
Some possible examples (depending on your goal):

- I will tell my mother how much I appreciate her hard work three times a week.
- I will work to ensure that 2 more women are included in positions of power on the community council or school board.

- I will teach my children about powerful women role models in the stories I tell or read to them at night.
- I will support the construction of a women's health care clinic in our community.
- There may be other actions you can ask the community to take to achieve a change in behavior or policy. For example, you can ask them to sign a petition, join your campaign, provide resources or pressure a power holder with a particular demand.

Please share your photos, videos, testimonies, pledges and action stories with us at Creative Action Institute! We want to disseminate your stories to the world!

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² <http://rcnjwc.blogspot.com/2014/03/womens-herstory-month.html>