

Case Study: FEMRITE Training Programme in writing and personal empowerment skills

Partner: FEMRITE supported by HIVOS (International Humanist Institute for Cooperation in Developing Countries)

Location: Kampala, Uganda

Contact: Hilda Twongyeirwe
Co-ordinator FEMRITE
Uganda Women Writers' Association
Plot 147, Kira Road, Kamwokya
PO Box 705, Kampala
Uganda
E-mail: info@femriteug.org
Tel: +256 41 543943 / +256 77 2743943

Introduction

FEMRITE - the Ugandan Women Writers' Association - is a membership-based, indigenous, non-profit-making organisation that promotes Ugandan women writers through publishing their works. Since its establishment in 1996, FEMRITE has consistently worked towards building a strong base, and creating an identity for women writers, especially the upcoming ones.

At the time of FEMRITE's inception, only a handful of women authors were published, compared to men. This was largely due to lack of supportive structures to nurture, groom and tap new talent. The other impediment, however, was the specific challenges peculiar to women writers, such as low or lack of self-confidence and auto-censorship. FEMRITE's priority task, therefore, was to address the imbalances that existed between women writers and their male counterparts, by creating an environment that would enable more women to write and get published. One way FEMRITE did this was to design a training programme that would increase the women's self-empowerment, and also build their writing skills, so they would acquire the confidence to tell their stories and have them published.

Activity

FEMRITE conducted six training workshops between 1999 and 2001, with the objective of enabling participants to develop their writing skills, thereby enhancing their self-confidence as professional storytellers. Thirty members of FEMRITE from different backgrounds, including teachers, nurses, journalists, students and development workers who had demonstrated interest, ability and the talent to write, participated in the programme.

The training sessions covered topics ranging from the basics of writing, technical aspects of writing, the publishing process, to self-development and discovery. They were facilitated by leading African writers, including the celebrated Ghanaian writer and Commonwealth Writers' Prize winner, Professor Ama Ata Aidoo, and Sudanese-Ugandan acclaimed poet and Professor of Creative Writing, Taban lo Liyong.

The participants were each required to produce a publishable creative piece of writing at the end of the three-year training sessions. These stories were later published in 2001 by FEMRITE in an anthology entitled 'Words from a Granary'.

Impact

The most outstanding outcome of the training programme was that participants were motivated and enabled to write candidly the stories in their hearts, which in turn, led to improved quality of writing. The investment in this programme has over the subsequent years paid off, as reflected in the literary recognition and awards accorded to some of the women writers who participated in the training.

Five of these authors won the Uganda National Literary Award between 1999 and 2004. In 2005, the Macmillan Writers' Prize for Africa was awarded to Glaydah Namukasa, a nurse, and former participant in the FEMRITE training programme, while Jackee Batanda, who also participated the training, was Africa's winner in the 2003 Commonwealth Short Story Competition. Doreen Baingana, winner for the Africa region of the 2006 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, was also a participant. The most recent literary acquisition by another laureate in the training programme is Monica Arac de Nyeko, who won the Caine Prize for African Short Story Writing Competition for 2007.

Four other FEMRITE programme trainees have participated in international writing fellowships and exchange programmes, which include the month-long Cheltenham Literary festival in the UK, the Iowa Writers Fellowship in the US, and a three-month writer-in-residence fellowship at UK's Lancaster University.

Many more women have had their books published both by FEMRITE and by other local and international publishers. This validation and recognition has raised the profile of FEMRITE, and turned the writers into Uganda's cultural ambassadors abroad. These authors also continue to inspire other struggling, upcoming writers, especially in Africa.

Lessons

By designing a programme targeted to address both the writing skills acquisition and the self-confidence development of the writers, FEMRITE was able to tackle the root cause that impeded Ugandan women's writing and publishing potential. The participants in the programme were at different levels in their writing careers. While some were already published, others had written manuscripts which were still waiting to be submitted to publishers, and the majority were only beginning to write. Previously, most of these writers shared one thing in common: the inability to tell the stories in their hearts, in fear of what society would think. The training sessions and experience-sharing enabled them to shed their inhibitions, and as a result their writing quality improved.

Building on the success of this programme, many more Ugandan women are now in print, and FEMRITE has grown into one of the leading writers' support groups in Africa. The literary accolades won by the writers have been a welcome and much needed recognition for artistic talent, which goes a long way in motivating more writing.

This programme has been recommended to other writers' support groups, and more so, for those based in Africa. The writers were able to take time off from their heavy, and demanding, professional and domestic responsibilities in order to concentrate on their writing during the training sessions. For follow-up, this programme could be repeated every three years to target another group of participants.

Recognition and Validation