

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING ON REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS: ADVANCING CRITICAL AWARENESS AND EQUITY

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### Abstract

Reproductive rights are a fundamental aspect of human rights, yet in Indonesia this issue is often narrowly perceived as women's issues. Among university students, including future health professionals, limited literacy and persistent stigma restrict critical engagement with reproductive health and equity. This study explores how digital storytelling can serve as a transformative pedagogical tool to foster critical awareness and collective responsibility for reproductive rights. A qualitative case study was conducted with 25 students from five departments of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universitas Jambi. Data were collected through focus group discussions, participant observation, and documentation of digital storytelling. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key dimensions of students' interpretations and reflections. Five interrelated themes emerged: (1) bodily autonomy and courage to speak against stigma; (2) justice and partner involvement in reproductive health access; (3) universal access and solidarity across regions; (4) cultural barriers of stigma, silence, and discrimination; and (5) hope for equity through youth agency, educational innovation, and father involvement. Students recognized reproductive rights as a collective responsibility requiring individual courage, relational support, systemic equity, and intergenerational engagement. Digital storytelling facilitated critical reflection and the production of inclusive narratives that challenged gender bias and cultural taboos. Digital storytelling is an effective educational approach to foster critical awareness and advance reproductive health equity among future health professionals. This method offers an alternative pathway to instill a more humanistic and inclusive understanding of reproductive health issues.

**Keyword:** Reproductive rights, Digital storytelling, Critical awareness, Health equity, University students

### INTRODUCTION

Reproductive rights are an essential part of human rights, ensuring that every individual, regardless of gender, has the freedom and access to information, services, and decisions related to their reproductive health (1). In practice, however, discussions about reproductive health are often limited to women, overlooking the importance of shared understanding and involvement from all groups, especially men (2)(3). This gender-biased perspective creates inequality in awareness and participation, hindering collective efforts to promote equitable and inclusive reproductive health (4)(5). In Indonesia, reproductive health literacy remains low, particularly among adolescents and university students. Many young people still lack accurate, scientific, and contextual information about reproductive functions, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and reproductive rights (6)(7). This lack of knowledge is reinforced by cultural and social norms that treat conversations about reproductive health as taboo, leaving space for myths and misconceptions to grow (8). As a result, violations of reproductive rights, such as

child marriage, stigma around menstruation or pregnancy outside marriage, and neglect of reproductive health services for vulnerable groups, continue to occur.

In academic settings, especially among future health professionals, there is a need for deeper understanding and advocacy for reproductive rights. These students will become the next generation of healthcare providers who must combine clinical competence with social sensitivity, empathy, and awareness of the cultural and structural factors shaping people's health experiences (9). Understanding reproductive rights and gender equality equips them to deliver inclusive, non-discriminatory, and justice-oriented care. However, current health curricula often provide little space for critical and interdisciplinary exploration of sensitive and complex issues like reproductive health. Limited literacy and lack of reflective learning can lead to the perpetuation of gender bias, even among future healthcare professionals (10). Therefore, strengthening students' critical awareness and reflective thinking is crucial to building a more equitable and inclusive health system.

Digital storytelling offers a promising, participatory, and reflective approach for students to express their personal and social perspectives on reproductive health (11)(12). Through the creation of digital narratives, students move beyond being passive recipients of information and become active creators of meaning who can inspire awareness, empathy, and dialogue across genders. This approach fosters a more inclusive and humanistic learning environment that values justice and diversity. It also supports curriculum development and teaching methods that are more responsive to social and health equity issues. By engaging students in producing and reflecting on digital stories, this study contributes not only to individual growth but also to broader advocacy for reproductive health equality, aligning with the global goals of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) (13)(14).

The study's novelty lies in its innovative use of digital storytelling as a reflective and participatory learning method in reproductive health education. Unlike conventional, theory-based, teacher-centered approaches, this method empowers students as active participants who construct their own critical narratives about reproductive rights and gender equality. By combining emotion, personal experience, and social analysis, digital storytelling creates a holistic learning experience that remains underexplored in Indonesian higher education, especially in medicine and health sciences. This study explores how digital storytelling can help students at Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Universitas Jambi build critical awareness and strengthen shared understanding of equality in reproductive rights and health. It also examines how this method can serve as an effective educational strategy to challenge deep-rooted gender bias in reproductive health. Through this, the study contributes to developing transformative learning models that are contextual, inclusive, and relevant to the needs of today's generation of learners.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative case study involved 25 students from five departments at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universitas Jambi. The study explored how digital storytelling enhances critical awareness and collective narratives on reproductive rights and health. Participants were purposively selected based on their active involvement in reproductive health courses and willingness to create and present digital stories. Gender and socio-cultural diversity were considered to capture varied perspectives. Data were collected through focus group

discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and documentation of digital storytelling outputs. FGDs explored students' views and reflections, while observations and documentation provided contextual and narrative insights. All data were analyzed using thematic analysis through verbatim transcription, coding, and theme development. Key themes included critical awareness, gender equality, and reproductive rights. Credibility was ensured by comparing data from different sources, asking participants to confirm the findings, and keeping detailed records of the research process.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings show that digital storytelling effectively stimulated students' critical awareness and reflections on reproductive rights and health. Through visual and narrative engagement, students developed a deeper understanding of social and gender inequalities, stigma, and the need for open dialogue about reproductive health. The analysis revealed five interconnected themes, such as (1) breaking the silence and challenging stigma, where students viewed the stories as acts of courage to address taboo topics and resist restrictive social norms, (2) inequality and shared responsibility, which highlighted disparities in access to reproductive health services and emphasized that reproductive rights should be a mutual concern between partners, (3) equity and access, reflecting students' recognition of the importance of ensuring that reproductive health information and services reach rural and marginalized communities, (4) empowerment and solidarity, illustrating collective hope and awareness of their role in promoting equality and justice, and (5) youth as agents of change, showing students' optimism that creative and participatory approaches like digital storytelling can transform perspectives and drive social change toward reproductive health equity.

### *Breaking the Silence and Challenging Stigma*

Digital storytelling provided a safe and creative space for students to challenge taboos surrounding reproductive health. Many participants described it as an empowering way to speak openly about topics often considered private or shameful. As one student stated, "Talking about reproductive rights is still seen as shameful, but through this project, we could express it openly." Another added, "It made me realize that silence only keeps the stigma alive." The group discussions also revealed increased confidence in addressing sensitive issues: "At first, I was afraid to talk about these issues, but hearing others share made me feel braver," and, "This activity showed me that discussing reproductive health doesn't have to be taboo, it's about awareness and rights." These reflections demonstrate how digital storytelling functioned as both an educational and transformative experience.

### *Inequality and Shared Responsibility*

Students critically discussed the inequalities that affect access to reproductive health services, emphasizing that these issues intersect with gender and socioeconomic status. They recognized the unfairness experienced by marginalized communities, as illustrated by one student's comment: "Poor communities often have less access to reproductive services, and that's not fair." Another noted the importance of mutual accountability, saying, "Reproductive rights are not only a woman's issue; both partners must take responsibility." Participants also highlighted the gendered burden of reproductive health, sharing that "Many women carry the burden alone, while men are not equally involved," and "It made me think that equality also means men should understand and support reproductive health decisions." These perspectives underline students' awareness of shared responsibility and gender equity in reproductive health.

### ***Equity and Access***

A strong concern for equitable access to reproductive health education and services emerged in all FGDs. Students acknowledged that geographical and economic disparities hinder equal opportunities for health. One participant stated, “People in remote areas also deserve information and services, not only those in cities,” while another emphasized, “We need more health workers and education programs in rural places.” Several participants expressed that “Everyone should have the same chance to learn about reproductive health, no matter where they live,” and “Health access shouldn’t depend on how rich or urban you are, it’s a basic right.” These reflections demonstrate students’ growing understanding of structural inequality and their empathy toward marginalized populations.

### ***Empowerment and Solidarity***

Throughout the digital storytelling process, students reported a growing sense of empowerment and solidarity. Sharing personal and group narratives helped them recognize their capacity to advocate for change. One student said, “We realized we can contribute to change, even starting from our campus,” while another noted, “It is not only about women’s rights, but human rights that must be protected together.” Participants described feeling stronger and more connected through collective reflection: “Sharing our stories made us feel connected and stronger as a group,” and “I felt proud that our voices could represent others who are still afraid to speak.” These experiences show that the project fostered not only knowledge but also collective agency and social cohesion.

### ***Youth as Agents of Change***

Finally, students identified themselves as potential change makers in promoting gender equality and reproductive health. The creative nature of digital storytelling inspired optimism and a belief in the transformative power of youth-led initiatives. One student reflected, “As young people, we can change how society talks about reproductive health,” while another emphasized, “Digital storytelling is a new way to make people listen and care.” Others recognized the broader potential of technology, stating, “We have the power to use technology for social awareness, not just entertainment,” and “This experience made me realize that youth can lead movements for gender equality.” These insights suggest that digital storytelling served as both a pedagogical and motivational tool for social transformation.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results indicate that engaging students in digital-storytelling processes significantly enhanced their critical awareness of reproductive rights, health inequalities, and stigma. This aligns with the first objective of understanding how digital storytelling can improve students’ reflection and consciousness. The theme of breaking the silence and challenging stigma illustrates that students moved from tacit acceptance of reproductive-health taboos to actively articulating concerns and questioning social norms. Such shifts echo literature in health professions education, which shows that the co-creation of digital stories fosters deeper learning and reflection (15). By crafting and sharing their own narratives, students enacted the kind of critical pedagogy of voice and reflection described (16). Thus, digital storytelling not only served as a medium for content but as an experiential process through which awareness was raised.

Beyond individual awareness, the findings demonstrate that digital storytelling helped students move toward collective understanding and shared responsibility, addressing the second objective of strengthening collective narratives around reproductive rights and health. Students began to see reproductive health as not only an individual concern but as an issue shaped by gender relations, social equity, and community access. This shift toward a social-justice framing is consistent with prior research showing that digital storytelling interventions often elevate marginalized voices and encourage dialogue about structural determinants of health and equity (17). The sense of empowerment and solidarity that emerged among participants suggests that digital storytelling functioned as a catalyst for collective identity and advocacy, rather than just private reflection (18). This collective dimension is critical for building narratives that transcend individual stories and speak to systemic conditions and shared agency.

Furthermore, the findings underscore that students positioned themselves as active agents of change through the digital-storytelling process. This resonates with the objective of enabling students not only to understand but to act, and to develop narratives that strengthen reproductive-health awareness on campus and beyond. From a pedagogical standpoint, integrating digital storytelling combines multimedia engagement, narrative work, peer collaboration, and reflection, an approach shown to enhance engagement, communication skills, and critical thinking in medical and health education contexts (19)(20). For practice, the study suggests that when students co-create and present digital stories, they are more likely to internalize values of gender equality, community access, and rights-based health. For future research and program design, it will be important to evaluate not only awareness and narratives but longer-term outcomes (behaviour, advocacy, policy engagement) and to ensure that this pedagogical method is inclusive, ethically anchored, and context-sensitive.

## CONCLUSION

Digital storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool for enhancing students' critical awareness and collective understanding of reproductive rights and health. Through reflection, creativity, and collaboration, digital storytelling empowered students to challenge stigma, recognize inequality, and envision transformative social change. The process transformed learning from a passive transfer of knowledge into an active, participatory, and empowering experience. The students developed not only analytical insight but also a sense of solidarity and agency to advocate for reproductive justice. Integrating digital storytelling into public health education can therefore strengthen both cognitive and moral dimensions of learning, preparing future health professionals to become reflective, empathetic, and socially engaged change agents.

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