

Awake Not Sleeping: The Power of Storytelling to Activate Gender Equality and Respectful Relationships in Our Minds, Homes and Communities

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Introduction

During the emerging COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, UN Women Europe and Central Asia engaged a team of writers and gender equity consultants to support the process for reimagining fairy tales for a new generation of young readers. Over a two-year period, the UN Women team, Donna-Jo Napoli, Angela Walsh and Kalina Maleska collaborated with over 120 feminist writers to critically reflect on fairy tales from across Europe and Central Asia with “affectionate scepticism”² (Carter [x, 2005](#)) and to create our first, powerful *Awake Not Sleeping* collection of [28-twenty-eight](#) fairy tales to spark young readers’ curiosity about gender equality.

Alia El-Yassir Regional Director UN Women

The UN Women team in the Europe and Central Asia region deeply believes in the power of storytelling, not only to spark curiosity and imagination, but also to convey the principles of equality and justice to readers and listeners, especially when they are young. We embarked on the Awake Not Sleeping: Reimagining Fairy Tales for a New Generation initiative as part of our action to advance gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls across the region. The project is anchored in the idea that reimagining fairy tales provides a platform for communicating gender equality as a human right, whereby all people are equally valued and enjoy equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities so that they can live in dignity and realize their full potential.

The *Awake Not Sleeping* story collection has been a true labor of love over the past few years for myself and the team at the UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office. All involved, within and outside of UN Women, have put their hearts and souls into this collection. We took our inspiration from the *Once There Was a Girl* collection of stories developed by our UN Women Country Office in Georgia (UN Women, 2019). While I was supporting the promotion of *Once There Was a Girl* collection, I heard first-hand from our Georgian colleagues about how the idea for the book had come about: it all happened while the young mothers in our Tbilisi office were enjoying a cup of coffee together in the kitchen and while chatting, they realized that they have a shared frustration with the books they were reading to their children because they perpetuate harmful stereotypes about the roles of men, women, girls, and boys. They wanted something different for their children and the idea was born, then and there, to make it happen themselves. The project of our colleagues is truly inspiring and by partnering with writers, they succeeded in bringing back to life the stories of so many inspiring Georgian women and girls, some real, some mythical.

After reading the stories in the *Once There Was a Girl* collection, I saw the potential power of stories not only to bring to light stories of female protagonists who too often remain hidden, but also, to give insights into how rich and diverse world cultures are. I felt enlightened by these beautiful stories.

“Literature has the power to take us out of ourselves and return us to ourselves a changed self, to enlarge our thinking while educating our hearts.” (Huck, 1987)

Travelling across the Europe and Central Asia region I have come across many fairy and folk tales that still permeate each country’s rich cultural heritage. As these centuries’ old tales continue to be told and retold from generation to generation, they are woven into each country’s collective imagination. They play a powerful role in the socialization of children into their community’s traditions, laws, values, stereotypes, and norms. The stories can be

beautiful, but it is important to recognize how they can also be harmful. From our other work across our region, we know first-hand that some traditions and norms continue to limit women's and girls' ability from reaching their full potential and are the root causes of gender inequalities, with embedded discrimination and violence against women and girls.

Work on our regional initiative started in 2019, and we launched it as part of our work on Beijing+25. If you are wondering what that is all about, let me try to paraphrase here. The last World Conference on Women was held in 1995 in Beijing China, where over 17,000 people congregated from all over the world and thanks to their efforts, the most progressive global agenda on gender equality was born, the Beijing Platform for Action. No world conference on women has been held since, but every five years, there is a review of the progress against the standards enshrined in the Beijing Platform for Action. In 2019, we were preparing the countries in the region for the global review that was due to take place in 2020 to mark the twenty-five years since the Beijing conference and five years into implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Unfortunately, as the national, regional, and global review processes have shown us, progress towards gender equality remains painfully slow. Not only that. There is a growing pushback against women's human rights in many parts of the world, not least of which in the Europe and Central Asia region, under the pretext of traditional or national values.

No single country in the world has achieved full gender equality. Communities all over the globe have deeply entrenched traditional patriarchal values with female and male stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequity. Not least in mainstream folk and fairy tales where unequal power relationships between men and women often manifest, where women and girls are discouraged from reaching their potential, where whiteness is predominant, without reflection of intersectionality or diversity, where physical beauty and heteronormative standards are rewarded, and where material wealth is generally applauded.

Our curiosity awakened, we started to look more deeply at how women, men, and communities are represented in the fairy and folk tales popular across the region. Re-reading these stories, we found the majority still represented women as: rescued princesses, weak and without voice, submissive, lacking power and agency, humiliated, passive, poor, obedient, silent, asleep, or dead, objectified, disposable, victims, homemakers and carers, beautiful objects. If they have power, this is usually portrayed as evil, dangerous, seductive, or ugly. Largely secondary or absent characters. On the other hand, the male characters in the stories are protagonists, shown to be heroes, leaders, warriors, strong, brave, dominant, active, independent, powerful, handsome, clever, wealthy, protectors, breadwinners. Often violent or without emotion to others, lacking commitment to relationships or children.

We decided to look for different types of stories. We communicated with partners far and wide, but we were not able to get the kind of engagement we were hoping for. I reached out to one of my former bosses, a dear mentor and friend. She gave me the idea of holding a feminist writing workshop. The first workshop was the moment when the power and potential of creating a collection of fairy tales grew and grew like Jack's beanstalk and we knew that UN Women could play a critical role in supporting writers to bring gender equality to life giving us characters who stretch the boundaries of restrictive gender roles and expectations and challenged the harmful traditions, laws, values, and norms of their time. It was in this first workshop that the notion was born of women and girls in fairy tales supporting each other to stand firm in their own power, to challenge gender inequalities, and to create possibilities for change. In this workshop, we agreed that as we embark on this journey, we must be able to tell these tales well by harnessing the power of good storytelling and that we celebrate diversity in voice and culture across the region.

Since then, we've held a series of feminist writing workshops and writers' circles with more than 100 writers across the Europe and Central Asia region to transform and

reimagine fairy tales for a new generation. Since 2019, UN Women has worked alongside more than 120 feminist writers to reflect on fairy tales from across Europe and Central Asia with [Carter's "affectionate scepticism"](#) (~~Carter, 2005~~) and to create our first, powerful *Awake Not Sleeping* collection of twenty-eight fairy tales for young readers. It has been a long road, and we are overjoyed with the tales that have been included in this first collection, including stories from across Europe and Central Asia and beyond, including Iceland, the UK, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and others. Please read our *Awake Not Sleeping* stories and, writer and editor articles and writers' biographies [via this link](#).

The *Awake Not Sleeping* stories offer young readers across our region a sliding door that can help change and awaken how they see and think about the world they live in. They present a safe and captivating way to explore the challenging concept of gender inequality and to generate new ways of thinking and of having curious conversations to bring gender equality closer to reality.

Donna Jo Napoli

My part in the volume was to give writing workshops to contributors early in the process and then follow up with feedback on drafts of their stories. Since many of the contributors had never published before, my first job was to help them develop or, in some cases, hone skills as a writer. Many walked in with clear ideas of the message they wished to convey, but little sense of how to present it. My focus was on the presentation.

Your outrage, your message, your hope – these things are crucially important... to you. Not to your reader. A mistake (from my point of view) of inexperienced writers is to think people want to read the author's message. So that's what they write – a message – imbued with their outrage and hope. But that's not why people read fiction – people of any age.

If you want to learn about the habits of sharks, you go to the nonfiction part of the library. If you want to be frightened by sharks, you go to the fiction part of the library. We read fiction in order to have a vicarious ride. We want to experience what the main character experiences, and the more those experiences make us laugh or cry or cringe or rage or be aroused or bleed internally, the more we cling to the ride. Writers need to face reality: readers are blood thirsty.

If you don't give the reader what they want, they will stop reading – probably before they even reach the bottom of the first page. So, if you have something to say and if you want to say it via fiction, you need to learn how to compel the reader to keep reading. And that means you need to immerse yourself in the art of creative writing.

You need ingredients.

A plot. Something needs to happen. What exactly – well, that can be small or large or anywhere in between. It can even be entirely within someone's head. So, we can write about a character deliberating whether or not to get married even if they haven't received a proposal and even if there is no likely marriage partner on the horizon. A story about a hypothetical. We can also write about one country invading another when a character is writhing in labor in the maternity hospital. A story of enormity grounded in facts too familiar to us.

We can write about being inside a house listening to knocking on the door, or about simply sitting on the dirt, or looking at cows, or gathering stuffed animals together. We can write about anything – action or state – and it can matter to our reader so long as we make the reader understand why and how much it matters to the character(s) in that action or state.

And that brings us to another ingredient: character(s). Characters are the vehicle that enable the reader to have their vicarious ride. In order to do that, the reader has to climb inside a character's skin and perceive the world as they perceive it.

That job can be simple. Some characters are known to us because of their place in our shared cultural knowledge. So, if the one inside listening to knocking on the door – knocking and knocking and knocking – is the third piggie of the canonical three pigs and the knocker is the wolf, we immediately know how that piggie feels (two of his brothers have already been eaten, after all). Other situations are so dire that simply knowing who the character is suffices to make us empathize. So, if the one sitting on the dirt is a mermaid stranded high and dry after she tried to kill a fisherman, our throats close as hers must be doing. If the one looking at cows is a hungry dragon with a broken wing in a cave high up on a cliffside, well, the character's desperation becomes ours easily.

But it's that person gathering stuffed animals together who needs our writerly attention. Why would such an ordinary action matter?

The writer could simply tell the reader who is gathering the stuffed animals, where, why, when, and how. But that won't necessarily (nor even probably) invite the reader into the character's skin. Knowledge of the character and the character's situation needs to envelop us.

Knowledge. How do we know the things we know? There are so many paths to knowledge. Science. Experience. Meditation. Which do we have the most confidence in? And how do we react to each? If you are told 97% of the people with a given disease die within three months of diagnosis, do you, the diagnosed patient, prepare for your imminent death or do you trust you'll be in the lucky 3%? Are you a person of faith, so that your actions now are guided by a tradition? Do you feel isolated, adrift – born alone and destined to die alone? Do you simply know, through your own thought process, what is the decent way to behave in any given situation, so now you reach out to comfort those who love you and stand to lose you? There are no fixed answers here.

Writers can't hope to reach all their readers through any one path to knowledge. Readers are too disparate. But writers can draw on the physicality of life, on the things we are likely to have in common.

Many creatures are sighted – if our character is, what is the character seeing right now? Perhaps the character gathering the stuffed animals sees that one of them has been damaged -- perhaps a leg dangles, nearly detached.

Many creatures can feel wet versus dry. Perhaps our character touches the damaged part of the stuffed animal and finds it is wet. Maybe not dripping wet – but maybe soaked.

Many creatures can smell. Perhaps our character brings the stuffed animal to her nose and recognizes dog halitosis.

Many creatures can hear. Perhaps our character hears the click click click of dog nails crossing the floor in the next room.

Many creatures can taste. Perhaps fear is so strong that nausea rises in our character's throat, bitter and foul.

If we see and feel and smell and hear and taste what the character perceives, we are inside that character. Once the reader is inside the character, the writer has a chance at striking a chord.

Perceptions are a strong hook because they do not lie. They can be mistaken – but they do not purposely lie. So, if the reader perceives what the character perceives, the reader can be transported into the situation with an immediacy that doesn't require the reader to trust the writer. After all, who is this writer anyway? She just makes things up. But characters don't make up what they are perceiving. We believe characters' perceptions and, in believing them, we try them on – we climb inside the characters – we are enveloped.

One of my hopes in coaching writers for this volume was to remind them to respect their readers. Readers are not our pawns, to be placed on a board and manipulated. Go ahead

and try to control them – ha! You’ll fail in a second. Readers come with their own views, their own outrage, their own hope. And we writers want to reach all of them. Preaching to the choir is bogus work. Writing for an audience you don’t know is genuine work. Trying to get across a message may turn you into a preacher and you might find only the choir is listening. Instead, trying to tell a good story may turn you into a true writer and who knows who will be listening.

Yes, there’s no doubt that in recorded times in many places men have prevailed. They’ve had a good long run. But there’s also no doubt that conventionalized gender roles have done extensive damage to all of us – all of us. If you write a good story – with a tight plot and with well limned characters the reader trusts in a setting that is coherent (historically accurate, or, if a fantasy world, internally consistent) – and you write it with honesty about all creatures, you may have a greater chance at touching the heart of any number of readers, regardless of their gender. If you let honesty imbue your work, there is no doubt that whatever message might be inside you will be suffused throughout the story unconsciously. And, more, with this approach, you can have no regrets. So, my message to writers is: forget about messages. Be honest. Write your skin off.

Angela Walsh

I am a Scottish Australian woman who for the last twenty-five years has worked across Australia and internationally supporting community-led, intersectional prevention of violence against women and girls, and gender equity approaches. My part as the Coordinator of the *Awake Not Sleeping* initiative, has been developing and facilitating the writers workshop series and writers’ circles, and as an Editor, guiding writers through their rewriting and reimagining of their chosen fairy tales. My contribution is founded in the principles of care and collaboration. I support writers to consider and challenge gender inequalities and other

intersecting injustices like racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism in their stories and to dismantle the omnipresent and insidious harmful social norms that normalize these gender inequalities and intersecting injustices.

Over the last twenty years, governments and their authorized partner organizations have taken “responsibility” for, and ownership of, progressing gender equality and the prevention of violence against women and girls. This mainstreaming has centralized funding for governments’ own strategies, action plans and roadmaps, whilst limiting critical funding to sustain and enhance existing and impactful community-led prevention initiatives. Over time there has been a gradual erasure of the work of those courageous and innovative community activists who lead localized change, and a sidelining of their achievements as governments and institutions step into the spotlight. This now slow-paced, often politicized “vanilla” change process occurs within a carefully controlled and curated echo chamber, doing as Donna Jo Napoli says, “the bogus work of preaching to the choir,” often excluding diverse perspectives and most dangerously creating an illusion of change for “all” women and girls. As rates of violence against women increase and gender inequality prevails here in Australia and globally, gender equity and preventing violence against women activism can often feel like fake work in a world of fake news.

As community-led prevention practitioners, my consultancy partner Nadia Albert and I have been increasingly questioning whether the echo chamber created by government-led prevention will ever reach children, young people, and families in meaningful or tangible ways. Working from the locked down city of Melbourne on the unceded lands of Wurundjeri people of Australia, the invitation to coordinate, facilitate writers’ workshops, and edit the *Awake Not Sleeping* initiative in 2020 was an exhilarating one, filled with immediate opportunity and endless possibilities—to support the creation of a collection of stories to bring alive gender equality in people’s minds, home, and communities.

As COVID swept the world, many of our writers and their families were locked down at home. The principle of care for each other, for our physical and mental health and our wellbeing in these challenging circumstances became, and still is, core to this initiative. Elif Shefak states in her article on the “Legacy of Lockdown” in the *Guardian* (17/3/2022):

This is a major crossroads for all of us – shaped by the pandemic but also the urgency of climate destruction, growing inequalities, and conflict on the European continent and beyond. The decisions that we make now will determine the quality of life for generations to come. None of us has the luxury of being disconnected, disengaged or numb.

UN Women took seriously the responsibility of creating a decidedly different and transformative fairy-tale collection during this pandemic. As Elif describes, we needed to connect, engage, and actively contribute to supporting gender equitable societies across our region. As activists, and gender equality and prevention practitioners, we hold a strong knowledge of the problems and actions we are demanding change for. Just like any great story, we needed the right ingredients to make this collection connect and resonate with children, young people, and their families. To harness the potential power of stories we required the expertise of writers of children’s fiction to guide our workshops and contributing writers through the editing process so that our stories would “compel readers to keep reading.”² Our literature review led us to Donna Jo Napoli, an American writer of children’s and young adult fiction, and to her extensive catalogue of reimagined tales filled with renegotiation, disruption, and dismantling of patriarchal ideologies and values. I am deeply thankful that Donna Jo immediately responded to our email request with excitement and an offer to run a writing workshop for us. Donna Jo facilitated rich and stimulating conversations on the art of writing during our writers’ workshops. Through her sessions and the editing process, Donna Jo compelled writers to bring all their senses into their writing for

children, to recognize children as sophisticated beings and never underestimate the complexity of children's feelings.

"A child does not owe you to read your story, you have to earn that child's interest by making them immediately know where and when they are, and what the issue is,"

Donna Jo Napoli, April 2021.

Kalina Maleska, a published writer of children's fiction and academic from North Macedonia, was one of the first writers to participate in our workshops. Her story, the "Child Without Golden Hair," was one of the first accepted into the collection. Kalina brings a rich and deep understanding of writing for children and young people in the fairy-tale genre to our team. She inspires writers to ask provocative questions in their reimagining, whilst being respectful of stories and tales with long cultural and regional significance. Kalina's academic research and knowledge on the child audience greatly supports our writers to deeply consider children and young people's understanding and response to tales.

"The best thing that could happen to a fairy tale, is that it leaves us asking more questions." Participant, April 2021

The 120 plus writers attending our feminist writer's workshops came from over ~~36~~[thirty-six](#) countries including Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan and most recently Andorra, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Portugal, and Turkmenistan.

We come together in our workshops as a collective of writers and feminists to critically analyze the role of storytelling in perpetuating, disrupting, and transforming gender inequality and to look ~~with "affectionate scepticism"~~[with "affectionate scepticism"](#) (Carter, 2005) at fairy tales from countries across Europe and Central Asia.

“This is a co-creation process where we will work with you on this journey finding the key messages we want to bring to children.” Nargis Azizova, UN Women ECA

As a group we contemplated how to

- Identify, critically reflect, and deconstruct regional key harmful social, gender, and cultural norms situated within fairy tales that enable gender inequality, and violence against women and girls.
- Reimagine a short and impactful intersectional feminist version of their chosen fairy story and
- Rewrite stories that are engaging and compelling for an eight to twelve-year-old audience from their country.

Writers shared the influence of fairy tales in their own childhoods and their passion, activism, and commitment to rewrite stories that have haunted and inspired them since childhood. They arrived at the workshop with a desire to reimagine powerful themes such as the portrayal of women as villains, witches, seductresses, women’s sexuality and desire, worker’s rights, women’s choices, and what it means to be a “proper” woman.

As 2020 and 2021 laid bare the many systems of oppression that impact on women and girls and their families across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic intersected with the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the escalating climate emergency.

Focusing the collection on gender alone would not have reflected the lived experienced of our diverse communities across UN Women’s Europe and Central Asia region. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge’s (2016) understandings of intersectionality became central for our *Awake Not Sleeping* initiative: “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences... When it comes to social inequity, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shared

not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.”

“Incorporating personal struggles can bring and relatability, integrity, and authenticity into our stories.” Participant, April 2021

As they developed their stories, our writers benefitted greatly using intersectionality as an analytical, actively exposing and examining the many axes of social divisions and their associated harmful norms, and structures. As you [read the collection](#), you will notice how the writers have reflected on and centered intersecting inequalities, such as ableism, racism, caring for land and the environment, and classism.

“Intersecting oppressions, such as ageism and classism, are all there in the story and can be worked with consciously.” Participant, March 2021

The *Awake Not Sleeping Fairy Tale Analysis Tool* (see Table 1 below) and the *Awake Not Sleeping Gender Equality Quick Quiz* has been developed as part of our [Reader’s Companion Guide](#)) to offer writers another way of critically reflecting on harmful norms in stories.

Examining cultural storytelling such as fairy tales, can help us explore the harmful social norms that are layered across intersecting complex challenges like violence against women, racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and ableism. Intentionally or unintentionally, as tales are ritualized through being told and retold, they reinforce these harmful social norms, communicating to young readers what is acceptable in their communities. Tales share with children and young people what are considered “good” or acceptable roles for men and women (gender conformity); what is considered a “normal” (nuclear/heterosexual) family, and they also reinforce multiple intersecting systems of oppression. Using these tools, writers and readers can notice, consider, and reflect on how gender equality and gender inequality are represented in any story or book they are reading and where on the continuum the story line sits: gender harmful or blind, gender aware or responsive, or gender transformative

(adapted from a continuum framework commonly used for gender analyses of public health programs).

Table 1. The Awake Not Sleeping Fairy Tale Analysis Tool

	Reinforces gender norms and stereotypes		Normalizes gender norms and stereotypes		Transforms gender norms and stereotypes
	Gender Harmful	Gender Neutral or Gender Blind	Gender Sensitive	Gender Responsive	Gender Transformative
How the story talks about Gender Norms and Stereotypes	<i>Stories reinforce and keep alive unequal gender stereotypes or show unequal power between characters</i>	<i>Stories ignore and do not explore gender stereotypes, inequality or gender norms</i>	<i>Stories recognise and respond to the different needs and limits based on gender and sexuality, but do not address gender inequalities</i>	<i>Stories actively acknowledge and examine societal gender norms, expectations, stereotypes and discrimination and their impact</i>	<i>Stories actively engage with building equitable social norms, changing behaviours, and structures to transform harmful gender norms, roles and relations</i>
Representation of characters and relationships (people, animals, fantastical creatures)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> White male characters are prioritized Unequal power relationships are maintained by control Violence against women (including sexual assault) is accepted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are only male or female representations (gender binary) Characters that do not conform to male or female are seen as disruptive threats Families are represented as only male and female married couples and focus on child rearing There is unequal power in relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Characters that do not conform to the male or female binary can succeed but systemic inequalities are not addressed Characters that do not conform to the male or female binary must earn acceptance White masculinity is always centered Intersectionality is not recognized Inequalities in relationships are not explored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Characters that do not conform to the male or female binary are accepted Gender and sexual diversity is represented Power inequalities in relationships are explored Intersectionality is not recognized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowerment and value are beyond gender conforming Gender and sexual diversity are celebrated, including diverse families and multiple meanings of sex Stories and characters draw on real heroes, leaders and activists Complex explorations of self and systems are at work Equal power and interdependence are negotiated
Representations of community values and ideologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are unequal power relationships between men and women There are uncaring relationships between parents and children There is a normalization of violence against women Heterosexuality is centred with a focus on white men The gender binary and conforming to it is rewarded Whiteness is centered, without any reflection of intersectionality 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heterosexuality is normal and patriarchal systems are upheld Focus on white, individualistic capitalist systems upheld Slow small changes are expected and accepted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systems of gender inequality are made visible and challenged Gender is seen in isolation (not in an intersectional way) White capitalist systems are upheld 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a legacy of contemporary intersectional feminist realities There is a celebration of alternate values to capitalism, There are alternate transformed realities
Narrative strategies (Crew, 2002; in reference to the work of Donna Jo Napoli)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The narrator is “Authoritative, omniscient, anonymous...” who reinforces and encourages unequal power between characters. Gender harmful themes are placed throughout and across imagery, metaphor, structures of plot in the story 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Voice, agency and subjectivity are given to those who have been previously silenced and objectified... [or] Othered” e.g. First-person narratives to identify character thoughts & feelings e.g. Plural narrative characterised by multiple shifts in perspective. Gender responsive themes. Some “fairy tales” challenge gender stereotypes and 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Readers are supported to personally connect, critically reflect to reimagine intersectional gender transformation for themselves, community & systems Feminist themes are placed throughout and

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stories are mirrors and windows that reflect back gender inequality and violence against women and girls 	patriarchal ideologies only at the story level of the text” (Dallacqua, 2019) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stories are mirror and windows that reflect back feminist understanding of the world 	across imagery, metaphor, structures of plot in the story <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stories are sliding doors or prisms that change the readers thinking and motivate them to act for gender equality
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The social norms identified by writers across our region in each workshop did not differ greatly, although there were some distinctions acknowledged between capital cities, villages, and towns. The key harmful norms identified included:

- Women should be fulfilled through motherhood and being a wife, their main role being to meet the needs of men, their marriage, and the care of children.
- Divorce is perceived as the failure of the woman.
- Religion is used by men to promote their ideas of how women should behave and live.
- Violence against women is accepted as normal, and there is a lack of safety at nighttime for women.
- Men are over-represented in positions of power in institutions that can take away and control women’s rights.
- Girls are raised to be strong and independent but get put down for this in adulthood.
- Strong and independent women are seen as bossy, and ignorant; while men who are career driven or take up space are considered and portrayed as brilliant geniuses.
- Businesswomen and “career women” are questioned and portrayed as bad wives and mothers.

“Dark stories are powerful and hold truths that happy endings may not. It will be interesting finding the right words to describe threatening things to children”
Participant, March 2022

Writers found the participatory *Awake Not Sleeping* workshops and follow up writers’ circles were “important, and powerful” (Participant, 2021). There was a shared joy in simply

being able to talk with other women and writers about what is happening in their countries. Many writers expressed interest and were deeply saddened that gender inequities and harmful norms still exist in families, marriage, and the community norms across the region.

Writers also reflected upon how the initiatives bringing them together was a rare and precious opportunity to connect with new people during the pandemic, to collectively create, share conversations and develop stories together, and to understand frameworks for creating engaging tales encoded with themes to bring gender equity to life in storytelling.

“We are opening new doors and there are so many paths we could go down - it’s a bit scary and exciting to work out which way to go! An explosion of possibility!”

Participant, March 2022

Kalina Maleska

I contributed to and learnt from both sides of the *Awake not Sleeping* story development process – as a writer of two stories in the collection, and as a member of the editorial team.

When I was a child, we had six volumes of books of folk and fairy tales: three volumes entitled *Tales of the Yugoslav Nations*, and three volumes entitled *Tales from the World*. I was so impressed with these stories that I read them time and again throughout my childhood. Some of these fairy tales shaped my worldview, certainly my reading habits and my future career dedicated to literature. As I read, I always imagined what I would have done differently if I could have become a character in the stories. Encouraging and exploring various perspectives of existing stories has intrigued me ever since my very first attempts at writing.

Writing for and working with eight to twelve-year-old children, reinforced what UN Women knew in initiating this collection, and what Donna Jo reminds us, that our young readers must be respected for their sophistication, for the diverse life experiences they bring, and for their agency as critical thinkers. What an important and wonderful challenge we had

ahead of us then in writing and editing to create a collection of stories that would meet the developmental enquiries, quests, and thirsts of our readers living in so many different contexts and circumstances across Europe and Central Asia. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) articulated powerfully that, literature, story and in particular, characters serve as critical “mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors” for children as they actively seek to see and learn about themselves, their worlds and other possible realities. Bishop writes that “literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human inexperience.”

In my writing practice, I strive to create opportunities for readers to think actively about the stories they read, and the values that these stories represent. I use narrative techniques such as the introduction of conflicting viewpoints, foregrounding aspects that stray away from traditional social norms, or discussing painful topics, such as loss or grief. These strategies allow me to emphasize the process of change and the importance of always rethinking existing values as well as emerging ones. As a writer, parent, and teacher, I have noticed that subtlety and asking questions greatly help to encourage active and critical reflection skills, not only towards the stories, but towards the world more broadly.

In deciding which tale to rewrite for the *Awake not Sleeping* collection, I went back to the six volumes that I had not opened for over twenty-five years. Even beyond my expectation, I discovered they were full of stereotypes, gender bias, exploitation, rigid hierarchical structures, manipulation presented under the guise of wisdom, and narrative logic that invites readers to justify or even praise abusive tyrants – things that children may not always notice so easily. I chose a story that I had read as a young girl to analyze, undermine, and reimagine in order to subvert the oppressive systems that are so often uncritically presented in fairy tales. In the original version, a young woman from a poor family promises that if the king marries her, she will give birth to a boy and a girl with golden hair. The king does marry the young woman,

but a jealous cook replaces her children with dogs, and sends the children away down the river. As punishment, the king has the queen horrifyingly bricked up to her neck. After many years and various developments, the king discovers that he was deceived, meets the promised golden-haired children, and releases the queen. There were so many problematic themes that I wanted to deconstruct; from the seemingly omniscient narrator, the unexposed cruelty of the king, the patriarchal structures, the lack of character development, that they were only ever referred to by their titles, to the unexamined accusation of jealousy of the cook. My first draft was a lengthy eleven pages as I attempted to tackle each and every injustice, I felt was deeply wrong as an adult reader and activist.

Working together with the editors, I decided the most important theme to deconstruct was how the story presents the king's bricking up his wife and ordering everyone to spit on her as justified; in the fairy tale that I read, he is not presented as an unjust tyrant, but simply as a person who is deceived by the jealous cook, and a reasonable person who upon realizing his mistake, [“rights his wrongs.”](#) And so, my tale, now titled “The Child Without Golden Hair,” gained focus, and a more concise and coherent five-page story emerged. Having been a child who was fascinated by fairy tales, and as a writer with great respect for children as critical thinkers, my imagined story was less about changing plots or relationships, and more about using narrative strategy and changing the perspective to foreground the prejudices and the king's abuse of his power. Using a first-person narrator voice of a new character, the daughter of the cook, allowed me to give the reader a different insight into how the king's actions normalize cruelty and violence against women and girls.

“Rewriting a fairy tale was a wonderful adventure. The strong symbols hidden in every fairy tale, where every word counts, was a challenge – how to keep the elements that do not change the essence of the story but rethinking our place and defying gender stereotypes.” Katerina Paouri, The Myrtle Tree and Pomegranate Mirror

As a co-editor, I embraced this understanding of respecting the important and engaging elements of fairy tales with long traditions and reimagining the opportunities they offer to engage readers in vividly imagining and embracing transformative gender equity. I worked alongside my co-editor colleagues on dozens of submitted stories that reimagined existing, or drew on their motives to create new, fairy tales. Following the Writer's Workshops and before submitting a first draft, the writers engaged again with one another in Writers' Circles as an opportunity to read aloud, gain feedback and hear how readers might understand and feel about their stories. Throughout and between redrafting efforts, the editing team and shortlisted writers came together several times for feedback and collective decision-making to maximize the engagement and impact of each story. The initiative lives and breathes the feminist principles that Angela Walsh described, of “collaboration and care,” throughout the editing process.

I would like to share with you now some of the valuable threads that we discovered in how narrative strategy can be played with to invite readers to actively deconstruct gender inequality and vividly reimagine for transformative gender equality. This is a literary project, and as editors, we endeavored to retain its literary value. The central goal was to tell an interesting story, with engaging characters who could lead readers to open their imagination to new possibilities.

That is to say, that from our collective knowledge of how children understand and respond to stories, we knew it was important to present engaging stories without preaching or teaching lessons about how gender inequality or harmful norms should be undermined. Children do not enjoy narratives that are too obviously didactic, where they are being told what to think. They prefer to become absorbed in stories in which they identify with the characters and reach their own conclusions. The ideas and values can be implicit and subtle, with all the potential still to subvert stereotypes and question existing social norms.

Fairy-tale narratives often center and define characters by binary divisions between the hero and the villain, between good and evil, between rich and poor, between light and dark. In reimagining fairy tales, we wanted to add nuance, and believability to our collection's characters and their motivations. Rather than accepting that a certain character is pure evil, we pondered why characters might make the choices they do, whether they have insight or relationships that help or hinder their growth. Is it fear of losing something? Is it because they accept existing norms uncritically? Is it superstition that they use to justify their misuse of power over others? I had also observed several times how, rather than having a definitive or "happy ever after" ending that can give the satisfaction in some kind of resolution, leaving an open ending invites reflection or imagination, a narrative strategy rarely gifted within children's fiction.

In moving away from characters defined in binary opposition to one another, we also moved towards enriching stories and characters (and by extension gender equitable realities) that would be believable. This age group of children bring with them a healthy dose of scepticism about extraordinary events and prefer to decide for themselves if something is possible or impossible (or indeed impossible to label as either). I carried out research with eighteen children on reinterpreting fairy tales where I read them "Rapunzel" up to the point when the father agrees to give the baby to the witch, in exchange for lettuce for his pregnant wife. Sixteen out of the eighteen children answered that it did not make sense at all that a baby would be given away for lettuce. It is upon us as writers to make our stories believable to them—a story that does not ring true, can feel like a deception to children.

The essential believability of characters means they can be extraordinary but not idealized. Characters that are too clever, too brave, or too conscious, may not feel identifiable to children. While strong female protagonists are fantastic role models, for example, it was important that we were honest with children about the challenges and skills these characters

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would need to face to emerge victorious in battles with stronger and frightening adversaries. We played and invented realistic and fantastic ways that these characters could stand up to their oppressors and injustices. Would it mean that they physically prepare by learning martial arts? Or that they would use their mind and intelligence, rather than a physical strength? Or would their empowerment come from the fact that they dare oppose the oppressors, even if they don't easily defeat them? We aimed to show characters who were not perfect, but who could do what anyone can do decently, to solve or get them closer to their goals. Children like to think "I could have done that in that situation."

Through the fairy tales I write, I want to encourage girls and boys to think outside the box, to dare, to experience emotions, to dream, to fight for their rights, and to become protagonists of change." Roven Rrozhani, Hana the Girl who Caught the Sun

The power of storytelling is not always direct and explicitly visible. It does not have the same public presence, or immediate power as the declaration of political, legal, or economic decisions. In the long term, though, storytelling is highly influential in reflecting and potentially transforming the value systems on which whole societies are based. Stories are especially important for children as they are dynamically shaping their worldviews, influenced among other things, by the stories they read and hear. When children identify with some characters, or refuse to identify with others, or when they consider the challenges the characters face, then their awareness of other people develops, of how people can be both different from themselves and from each other. Storytelling has unprecedented capacity to encourage acceptance and empathy, as well as the realization, sensitivity, and curiosity about the vast and many ways to live, beyond just one norm to be followed.

Conclusion

On 18 November 2021, the *Awake Not Sleeping: Reimagining fairy tales for a new generation* collection was launched. More than 4,600 people participated in the launch event, both on UN Women's microsite through registration and through our livestreams in English and in Russian. In the week leading up to the event, #AwakeNotSleeping received close to half a million impressions on social media, gathered 2,300 mentions, and 71,000 people engaged with the event on social media with high levels of engagement from Turkey, Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Poland, Italy, Portugal, Brazil, United Kingdom, and Germany. It was truly a global event.

UN Women Europe and Central Asia's initiative has brought writers and gender experts together to question how gender inequality and its intersecting issues can be explored and reimagined through fairy tales. The development and editing process centered the importance of engaging story telling with great respect for the reflective and creative capacity of young readers. This collaboration has created a collection that has the potential to spark new conversations within families and friendship groups – conversations that can activate gender equality and respectful relationships in our minds, homes, and communities.

"Though stories can be tools for change, the power and potential for that lies within the reader. Once a story is written, it stops belonging to the writer and instead becomes a shared conversation." Deidre Sullivan, The Haughty Princess

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