


# Aisha, From Being Invisible to Becoming a Promoter of Social Change

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## Abstract

Aisha is a Moroccan woman who lives with her three children in a city in northern Spain. In July 2014, her husband was sentenced to prison for drug trafficking. This situation led her to return to Morocco with her family, but her high level of involvement in the school where her children had received an excellent academic and humanistic education was a key factor in her decision to come back to Spain. Mustafa, Ali, and Mohamed, aged 3, 6, and 8, are schooled in a Learning Community where Aisha participates as a volunteer. Specifically, she participates in a Dialogic Literary Gathering that is mobilizing a large number of other Moroccan women, as they are engaged in crucial debates regarding the social conditions and opportunities in the neighborhood. This biography analyzes how her involvement in Dialogic Gatherings with other Moroccan women and the sharing of thoughts has helped Aisha to transform her own personal situation as well as the social context in her neighborhood and the lives of “other women.”

## Keywords

communicative methodology, biography, transformation, leadership, solidarity

There have been three key moments in Aisha’s life-story: (a) when she stopped studying in Morocco to marry the man who is still her husband today; (b) her emigration to Spain with her first son, aged 9 months, to be reunited with her husband in the city where she still lives today; and (c) when she joined the Dialogic Literary Gathering (DLG), a training activity for families and residents in her neighborhood organized on a weekly basis at her children’s school, where they read and discuss works of universal classical literature.

Each of these moments is associated with a decision that changed the course of Aisha’s life and conditioned the way she related to other people and her surroundings. In this article, we look back at the life of this 28-year-old Moroccan woman, focusing on each of these moments to analyze, interpret, and comprehend the impact of her involvement in the DLG and the mobilizing effect that it now has on Moroccan women in her neighborhood. The egalitarian dialogue established with Aisha through communicative methodology (CM) reveals feelings, fears, interactions, and transformations that explain what happened as she shifted from being immersed in unwanted solitude and being “invisible” to leading the participation and involvement of other women in the DLG.

Following Denzin (2002), it is possible to comprehend social changes by studying the everyday lives of the subjects being researched. The biography technique used in this article visualizes the life-story of a woman who had gone unnoticed until now and reveals the transformational elements that made

such a change in the way she relates to her environment possible. Our communicative approach to this technique constitutes one of this article’s main contributions. The second contribution appears in the personal and collective transformation processes resulting from Aisha’s involvement in the DLG. A biography with communicative orientation requires certain conditions of dialogue and trust with regard to the researcher, thanks to which the relevant and significant information described herein has been obtained. Aisha constructs her story and offers profound, inter-subjective thoughts about her own transformation process on being involved in the DLG. The communicative process used to collect and analyze information fosters the appearance of sentiments, reinterpretations of the past in accordance with the present, and new considerations about one’s own life, thanks to the inter-subjective and egalitarian dialogue that is established with the researcher(s). Inter-subjectivity thus becomes a fundamental aspect of the CM (Flecha & Soler, 2014; Mead, 1967) that, as we shall see, connects with the changes that Aisha experiences and brings about.

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## Choice Without Renunciation: Communicative Interpretation of One's Own Life

Aisha was born in 1986 to a humble family in a town on the Moroccan coast that has grown over the years to become a city. All the adults in the family did whatever work they could find: Her father had been a van and taxi driver and also worked in factories, her mother was a cleaning lady and her aunts were cooks, waitresses, or factory workers. Her fondest memory is of how “the whole family lived together” in a large house: grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, cousins, and so on. Aisha explained that everyone had their own space but there was always somebody to be with whenever her mother, or aunts, had to go to work.

The two things that Aisha most appreciates from her childhood are, on one hand, that solidarity, support, living with her family, cousins, “being together” and on the other hand, going to school. She went from nursery school to a mixed primary school, completed secondary school, and went into further education to study agriculture. She loved going to school. She quickly and unhesitatingly answers the question about what she most liked about studying:

[I liked] everything! Getting up, going to school, studying, coming home in the evening, I liked that, of course! And learning, yes, and you feel that you are . . . that you are worth more than those who don't go to school . . . you feel that you are worth something.

Aisha enjoyed her studies, she had hopes, she felt appreciated, and she had friends to go out with and have fun. The same year that she entered agricultural school (secondary education), she met the man who would become her husband, Omar. Then, she had to make a choice. He lived and worked in Spain and spent his summer holidays in Morocco. That is how they met and after one year of seeing each other, they decided to get married. Family pressure, especially from her husband and her mother, led Aisha to drop out of college. She has lived with this frustration ever since:

You suddenly give up everything, everything, in one day you give up everything. . . . I felt bad about myself at first, and then I started accepting it. . . . Yes, I wanted to continue, even though I was married, engaged, I wanted to continue.

They were married in the Moroccan city where her husband was born, not far from Aisha's own town. She went to live with Omar's mother and he continued to live and work in Spain. They would see each other every three months, whereupon they had their first son, Mustafa. This life option enabled Aisha to be close to her family, which she visited often, and she could count on her mother-in-law for help.

Aisha does not complain about her life and accepts responsibility for her own decisions. She wanted to marry Omar and she did, even though that meant she would have to leave college. After a while she decided to emigrate to Spain and join her husband, where she had to confront loneliness and many other difficulties during a process of changes and transformations, which is analyzed in the following sections. Today, Aisha can say that she did not give up on her desire to study; she went back to school. For Aisha, joining the DLG was a turning point. The activity has a deep connection with her desire to learn, but the impact has meant more than that. It has brought her new friendships and the chance to help other women who, like her before she found out about the DLG, are overcome by loneliness when they find themselves in the midst of a migratory project that they never chose, in a different country where they do not know anyone. When Aisha explains what she does on DLG day, hope, sentiments, and the motivation to learn and discover are reflected in her face, her gestures, and her words:

[The day I have a gathering] I do the housework quickly so I have time to read the book and be able to take part in the discussions. It really excites me, you know?! When we are all together and we talk, and read and talk, and explain things . . . I prepare for it, I read at home, and look up the words I don't know, I jot them down in a notebook so I can . . . well, during the discussions I ask what it is, what it means, and I learn a lot of things.

The story of Aisha's life, seen from a communicative approach, enabled us to focus in the following two sections on (a) her personal transformation and (b) the important role of Aisha in the social transformation being generated in her neighborhood and in the lives of other women. On one hand, what Aisha did to make her desire to study again come true is explained by new interactions with, for example, Ruth, a voluntary researcher at the DLG, and with Sara, the headmistress at her children's school. Inter-subjective dialogue plays a very important role in this process. On the other hand, the DLG represents a real opportunity to materialize a desire that had been in her head for many years. This experience generates new interactions and new transformations in Aisha and also, through her, in other women.

## How to Continue With an Unchosen Project? Inter-Subjective Dialogue and Aisha's Personal Transformation

Aisha liked living in Morocco, but once again she gave in and went to Spain to be with Omar. It was not a decision she wanted to make:

My head is there. It's still there . . . Because I didn't choose the city or the country, I came because I had to live . . . You didn't choose where you wanted to live and now I'm trying to get by.

Aisha's emigration from Morocco to Spain was a confrontation between two very different worlds, one characterized by family union and solidarity, the other by solitude and difficulties. Nevertheless, she emigrated to embark on a life project that she had not chosen. Aisha explains how difficult it was for her to leave Morocco. She had never left her city and ever since she was a little girl she had been used to living with people she loved very much and receiving constant help. Her decision to emigrate brought her solitude, and now she has to face new difficulties. Her husband has been in prison since July 2014 for drug trafficking and, as she says, she is carrying on with a life project that is not her own: "I am continuing with something that was my husband's decision."

When Aisha emigrated to Spain alone, she had a 9-month-old son. She remembers the journey well. That was seven years ago, and now she has three sons aged 8, 6, and 3: Mustafa, Ali, and Mohamed. For the first few years, she just stayed at home looking after the children.

In Spain, Aisha had become accustomed to being alone and rarely leaving the house. In 2009, when her second son was 8 months old, they moved to the neighborhood where they now live. The oldest child started school there, completed three years of early childhood education and then began primary school. It was then that Aisha felt that she could not help her son with his homework and that was a key motivation for her to start studying again.

In late 2012, she decided to take action and start studying again. In her own words, "Once again I . . . you know? What I had before re-awakened in me, studying and learning more and all that. So, I made my decision." Since then, Aisha has studied at the school where her children go. She started with the DLG and has extended her training by taking language, instrumental knowledge, and school certificate courses. Aisha described her feelings on the first day that she went to school:

At first . . . I felt a bit shy, you know? I felt ashamed . . . And my son too!: "Mum, why? No, no, no, you can't go to the same school as me. No, no! . . . You are going to study, you're embarrassing me! No, no, no, no!" But when I got there I saw that I could learn so much . . . I came back with hopes of . . . with a really nice feeling, with hopes of continuing to learn.

The trust and security that Aisha has acquired since then have become a force that has transformed her life, with huge potential for social change. Today, Aisha explains how she is reassured every day that she made the right decision when she sees how proud her children are of her and how positive it has been for them that their mother has been so involved in the school:

My son likes it. . . . Now they know their mother comes, their mother talks to the headmistress, their mother goes to class

with the headmistress, she goes to discussions with the headmistress . . . Now they know they have no choice but to behave well . . .

Experiencing and participating in the DLG discussions potentiates inter-subjective dialogue that increases one's own expectations and changes reality (De Botton, Gírbés, Ruiz, & Tellado, 2014). This inter-subjective dialogue appears in the conversations and interviews that Aisha has had with Ruth, a voluntary researcher at the DLG who has become a role model and someone Aisha can trust. The personal security that she has acquired since she started going to the DLG has given her strengths and arguments, for example, to persuade her husband, who at first would not allow her to study, to end up accepting it. Some authors have spoken of the silent revolution and through dialogic feminism have made visible the contributions to equality made by women like Aisha, the "other women," who are not academic, or visible leaders of the feminist movement, and do not occupy positions of power (Valls-Carol, 2014):

[My husband] before, when he saw me with a book, he would laugh . . . but then he got used to it because he realized that it's what I wanted. Now he has no problem, you know? He let me go to the radio. . . . It was the first time I had gone to a radio station to speak, well, about my life, how I started to study and how I ended up with *The House of Bernarda Alba*! Yes, I spoke about my experience. . . . It meant a lot to me.

Aisha has faced problems on this path. Her husband worked as a gardener and a builder but he is currently serving a three-year sentence in a prison in the south of Spain. Aisha does not speak about him much and tries to manage alone with her three sons, with serious financial difficulties. She is looking for a job but she has not worked since the summer of 2013, when she was hired for a few days as a kitchen assistant.

She and her children live in a flat that is in very poor condition. They have leaks, dampness, and have even been infested with beetles because of the deteriorating building. The precariousness, lack of interactions, and personal impasse that Aisha endured during her first years in Spain led her to feel so lonely and helpless that she thought about going back to Morocco when her husband was imprisoned. And, that is what she did; she returned to Morocco in July 2014, once the school year had ended. She stayed there for two months, but in early September she decided to return to Spain so that her children could start school again. Her reason for coming back was the quality of education that they were receiving.

The education that Aisha's children receive in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city is better than that at schools in wealthier neighborhoods in any other Spanish or Moroccan city, because it implements the Successful

Educational Actions (SEAs) endorsed by the European Union Framework Programme for Research (Ríos, Herrero, & Rodríguez, 2013), which includes DLG.

Aisha's biography shows the strength of an "invisible" woman who has been able to pull through despite the problems she faces every day. The communicative orientation incorporates the idea of inter-subjectivity and interaction as key factors in the analysis of the changes experienced by the people studied, subjects who can become leaders in their community, as is the case of Aisha thanks to a change in her interactions. In her case, the interactions generated through the DLG opened the door to processes of personal and social transformation. There are two motivations that make this possible. On one hand her children, as we have seen, and on the other the people she has met at the DLG. There is therefore, another reason why Aisha decided to return to Spain; she had started participating in the DLG and was no longer lonely. Her major involvement in her children's school as a volunteer and participant in the DLG had provided her, in barely two years, with an environment in which she had found the support, friendships, and intellectual activity that she had longed for so much since she stopped studying to marry. When she came to Spain, Aisha was a shy, solitary woman. It was very hard for her to form relationships in an environment she found hostile, which she had not chosen, and where she missed her family and friends so much. Since she joined the DLG, Aisha has undergone a striking process of personal transformation:

Before [joining the gathering] I didn't leave the house or speak to people or anything. [Now] when I came to school and saw the neighbors . . . we'd talk about things, for example, in the community, at school and stuff, and they started getting to know me, you know? And then, if they didn't see me, they'd ask: "Where were you? We haven't seen you for some time" . . .

The DLG has changed her interactions and that has given her the strength to break down the barriers on her path. She has related to various and diverse people with whom she has created strong bonds of trust that she describes in this extract:

I went on a trip and, well, I left my house keys with a neighbor, who's Spanish. . . . I could never have imagined that: me leaving my house keys and all my things with a woman I don't know, you know? And with the trust just from talking to her, meeting her, and they get to know me . . . That's enough. . . . I left my house, everything, all my belongings, everything! Yes, that's trust.

Aisha's personal transformation is linked to the collective changes that she is leading in the neighborhood. As we shall now see, she has been a role model for other Moroccan women. They share their experiences and difficulties with her, and she exercises highly transformational leadership on the basis of solidarity and empathy (Padrós & Flecha, 2014).

## The Social Context in Aisha's Neighborhood and the Lives of the Other Women: Dialogic Interaction and Social Transformation

In late 2012, before her husband was imprisoned and before Aisha's attempt to return to Morocco, she joined the DLG. This was a key moment in her life and the one that has most transformed her. It was a dialogic choice, because people like Ruth and Sara encouraged her to join; and, also a desired choice, because it connected with the dream of studying that she had been putting off. She remembers when Sara, the headmistress of the school, suggested that she should take part in the training activities offered at the center, one of which was the DLG:

Yes, the headmistress, I brought my son and she came out and said to me: "Listen, Aisha, I want to talk to you, OK? Why don't you come to . . . ? What do you think about coming to study?" I was surprised.

The first book that Aisha read and discussed at the DLG was *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca (1936/2006) and, from that moment, her life changed. She met other participants at the school and made friends with residents from her neighborhood. She had more interactions and this had a very positive effect that increased her autonomy and self-confidence, equality and dialogue being two of the key elements of her relationships with her companions. Analyzing in depth the transformative effects of SEAs such as DLG contributes new evidence along the lines of authors such as Göle (2005), Touraine (1997), and Sen (1999). Here, the communicative orientation is an added value, which allows us to visualize new elements of Aisha's biography, which can be extrapolated to other women who exercise invisible forms of leadership.

The DLG is a place that generates discussions with a great deal of emotional content. The participants share common, personal or neighborhood problems, and find support and solidarity. As Aisha says, "We share everything in the discussions, laughter . . . Everything! Everything!" However, at the DLG, a large amount of information is also transmitted and shared, and it is therefore one of the places where most is learned on an instrumental level: reading and writing, vocabulary, language, history, current affairs, and so on. This requires a major effort from the participants because, like Aisha, many of them do not have a very high level of comprehension of the Spanish language. However, there is very high motivation at the DLG thanks to the books they read, always universal literary classics, thanks to the profundity and meaning of the discussions they generate, and thanks to the pleasant atmosphere and transformational interactions that arise from this egalitarian dialogue. They, therefore, improve their language and reading skills:



Reading books that you are not used to reading, you know? It's something new. [And from the very first moment] I liked it . . . Reading other books and subjects that I never had the chance to . . . Or I never thought I would read. Because I didn't know Spanish, much Spanish . . . ¡And I learned to read, of course!

The DLG has brought out Aisha's capacity to improve her life and that of the people around her. At the DLG sessions, all opinions are evaluated and respected and none is better than another, as freedom of interpretation of the books that they read is encouraged. The important thing is not the use of perfect grammar without accents when intervening, for what is valued is the content of what is being said and the arguments being presented, rather than the way they are said. This methodological orientation encourages very profound and interesting contributions because, as Aisha explains, all opinions are valid and you can say what you think:

When you go to a discussion class . . . you get the chance to participate, and to talk and let yourself go, say what you think, how you have lived and all that, what you're living now . . . Everything!.

The fact that the researcher is placed on an equal footing gives the information provided greater significance and meaning. Aisha's account shows a great capacity to interpret her own situation, her life-world and systemic constraints. The scientific analysis provided by the researcher from communicative orientation makes it possible to understand reality with less sexist and ethnocentric bias, as it starts on an equal footing with the subjects researched and gives their arguments validity. This allows us to understand, to go further and identify, in addition to the exclusionary, the transformative components in the actions and lives of people like Aisha.

The women participating in the DLG include mothers of children studying at the school, other women from the neighborhood who send their children to other schools, and even women from other neighborhoods in the city. The discussions and thoughts that are produced at the DLG create, modify, and/or extend the opinions of the participants. The arguments they give provide a great deal of information but, most of all, new perspectives, ways of thinking and of viewing the world:

I like the whole discussion: reading and then . . . explaining what you understand . . . and relating to other mums, finding out what they think about you. Before they had, well, an opinion of you, that you're Muslim, they didn't realize that you live almost the same as they do, you think the same as they do . . . [They think that] Islam is terrorism but they don't know you and now we have the chance in these discussions, we get to know each other, how we think and all that . . . and now they say: "yes, that girl's a good person," they do now, but not before.

The interactions produced there thus improve their coexistence, which is so important in a neighborhood whose residents are in precarious situations in terms of work and money, and may even be in danger of social exclusion. For years, an important part of the studies on vulnerable groups, and especially on ethnic minorities, has been devoted to making diagnoses on the situations of social exclusion experienced by people and communities in socio-economically degraded areas (Elboj, 2014). Given that focus, such studies have not provided tools for generating transformation. This is one of the contributions of the CM, which when collecting and analyzing the information it seeks shedding light on both excluding and transformative aspects of reality, starting from the assumption that all people include both aspects of reality in their life history, in their biography.

At the DLG, Aisha has connected with the needs and hopes of other women, and this has proved crucial in her leadership of these women since she joined the DLG. On one hand, she encourages everyone to receive training and continue their education, for example, the ladies she meets in the neighborhood, who stop Aisha in the street and thank her.

On the other hand, Aisha mobilized many Moroccan women from her neighborhood, for whom she has become a role model. For example, if a meeting is called for the families at the school, the participation of many Moroccan mothers is guaranteed if she is involved in the organization, and because of that several Moroccan women have joined the DLG. Aisha encourages them to join in the discussions: "She wanted to learn to read, so I told her: 'Look, this is the chance you have to learn to read and know . . . and learn.'"

The CM enabled us to identify this type of "invisible" leadership that is not based on charisma or an attitude of being the protagonist. On the contrary, Aisha is a simple woman who tries not to be seen too much in the public spaces where she is active. However, this is precisely what makes her stand out and has made her a role model for other Moroccan women. She now develops this leadership in different places where she coincides with local residents, but the origin is at the DLG. The way in which Aisha participates in her neighborhood and interacts with other Moroccan women is an important contribution to the conceptualization of a different way of exercising leadership to the benefit of the community (Padrós & Flecha, 2014). The conversations she has with all these people are constant and have exponentially increased since she first became involved in this activity. The key factor is the arguments she offers, which are not the result of a strategy to make herself popular, but the result of what education means to her. And, this is exactly what she transmits to her neighbors:

I see them [Moroccan women] come, starting to live like I did before, you know? And I don't like to think that they're going through what I did before. [I tell them] to start studying and to

do new things . . . that way you change your lifestyle, and learn, . . . and you help your children.

Finally, the DLG connects with the one thing that most stands out from Aisha's childhood: Solidarity has once again been a key factor in Aisha's life since she joined the DLG. Now, this solidarity is the basis of the social change that she is promoting in her neighborhood, specifically the support she is giving to other women. This has helped to improve their standard of life, providing them with places to learn and make friends who can give them the support they need to overcome the difficulties they face:

I met [my friend] here at the school. She brought her child here to the school, didn't go out, didn't even go to the supermarket alone . . . And when she met me, she started to change her life. . . . Little by little I convinced her and she came to study. She comes with me every day, [I've brought her] to the gatherings as well. She's changed.

She does not want other women to go through the same solitude and isolation that she did, and energetically encourages them to study and participate, aware of the positive effect that the DLG will have on anybody's life: "Now we have something to talk about: 'Have you done your homework? Yes, no, or that's good, that's bad' . . . We talk about Bernarda, how she behaves with her daughters."

Aisha's biography shows the social and personal transformative capacity of the DLG. Through this SEA, Aisha is strongly connected to the other Moroccan women of the neighborhood, who are also improving their lives and environment beyond the DLG classrooms.

## Conclusion

One of the most important contributions of qualitative research is that it has enabled in-depth analysis and interpretations of the subjects to understand their actions better (Gómez, Latorre, Sánchez, & Flecha, 2006; Mead, 1967). By approaching Aisha's biography communicatively, we have revealed the hidden process by which, in less than two years, this woman has become a role model for other women. Her solidarity has multiplied since she joined the DLG and she has thus managed to persuade other women to transform their lives. Through their involvement in this SEA, these women, many of whom are Moroccans, have improved their standard of living and that of their families, because they have more interactions, they learn, and they feel able to help their children, with their homework for example. These women are participating more and more in the local school's educational activities, especially in the DLG. Aisha is giving them the support and strength that they need to do this.

Aisha's life is marked by reflexivity, a characteristic of Western modernity in which we are subjected to constant

changes that condition our destiny, and for which reason we have to make decisions that will affect our personal trajectories (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). Aisha has made decisions that have affected her life trajectory and through which we have communicatively reconstructed her biography. The decision that changed her life was to join the DLG. Inter-subjectivity is also seen in the story of this stage of her life, which brings out very profound sentiments such as trust, friendship, and respect that Aisha transmits to the interviewer, Ruth, with whom she feels a bond of trust and a special connection as they both participate in the DLG. Aisha's interactions with the participants in the DLG are essential to understand her transformation. For example, the trust in and high expectations that these people have of Aisha have contributed to changing the perception that this immigrant, Moroccan woman in a situation of severe socio-economic precariousness, had of herself. Aisha began to think about the possibility of studying again and this became a reality with the DLG. The interactions that are created in this dialogue and learning space transform the lives of its participants, because its effects persist after each session. Aisha has incorporated into her thoughts the debates held in the DLG and the relations of friendship with some of its participants, including Ruth, giving her the strength to confront new situations and challenges in her life.

The DLG is a space for dialogical interaction, where there is no place for impositions, coercion, or positions of power, and where all valid arguments are respected and viewed positively (De Botton et al., 2014). This dynamic enables multi-disciplinary learning based on the finest literary works ever produced by humanity. The participants in the DLG often find connections between their own lives and the characters in these great works of universal literature. This connection, regardless of the place, culture, or time, is what distinguishes the classics from other books and is the basis for the strong motivation that Aisha feels for the DLG. This motivation is so transformational that she manages to persuade more and more women to follow her example each day, to join the DLG, to connect the discussions to their own lives, and to establish caring relations that improve their lives and their environment. On incorporating the excluding and transformative aspects of reality, the communicative orientation from which Aisha's biography has been analyzed allows us to visualize new realities, such as the leadership exercised by Aisha and its effects on improving the lives of other women, which with other forms of collecting and analyzing the information may remain concealed behind stereotypes of gender and ethnic origin.

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**Olga Serradell**, PhD, is currently a Ramon y Cajal researcher in the Study Group on Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (GEDIME), at the Department of Sociology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). Between 2006 and 2008, she obtained a scholarship from "la Caixa" and the French government to carry out a postdoctoral research in the Center for Sociological Analysis and Intervention (CADIS), founded by Alain Touraine and led by Michel Wieviorka, in the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. Her work is linked to projects that study the strategies to overcome the inequalities facing vulnerable groups, specifically ethnic minority women. The results of the projects in which she participates are reflected in her publications, such as two recent scientific articles in the *Journal of Gender Studies* and the *European Journal of Women's Studies*.