

The Impact of COVID-19 on Survivors of Human Trafficking in Kenya: A Participatory Approach

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Researchers and practitioners are increasingly calling for the involvement of survivors of human trafficking at all levels of, and in all areas of, anti-trafficking research, policy, work and legislation.¹ Although it is now quite common for survivors to be called on to share their stories, this risks re-traumatising survivors, impeding or undoing progress in their recovery and sidelining them away from decision-making and the opportunity to exercise agency in the anti-trafficking sphere.² Survivors may be used (a term we employ deliberately) by a third-party to engage emotionally with policymakers, funders and members of the general public, but their narratives are often shaped into expected contours – especially of innocence and victimhood – and sometimes even re-purposed without their consent. That is, there is an increased willingness to see and hear survivors, but on terms set by those with more power, and with little commitment to sharing that power and working collaboratively – never mind letting survivors take the lead – in combatting human trafficking. And there are powerful expectations from survivor narratives which impact how survivors are engaged with and the roles they are allowed to perform.

More equitable, collaborative and inclusive methodologies have already been developed in the Arts, notably ethical storytelling and participatory photography.³ Our project makes a meaningful intervention in anti-trafficking work by combining these two methodologies: through a series of workshops, sixteen survivors were invited to produce complementary stories and photographs that resonated with their lived experience.⁴ To our knowledge, this is the first time both methodologies have been employed together in anti-trafficking work. Providing participants with a platform through which to produce both images and stories empowered them with multiple creative means to tell their own stories.

¹ See: “Vision & Mission,” *Survivor Alliance*, <https://www.survivoralliance.org/vision-mission>, Accessed 19 February 2021; Sue Lockyer, “Beyond Inclusion: Survivor-Leader Voice in Anti-Human Trafficking Organisations,” *Journal of Human Trafficking* (2020): 1-22.; Karen Countryman-Roswurm, “Rise, Unite, Support: Doing ‘No Harm’ in the Anti-Trafficking Movement,” *Slavery Today Journal: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Human Trafficking Solutions* 2, no. 1 (January 2015): 26-47.

² See: Karen Countryman-Roswurm and Bailey Patton Brackin, “Awareness Without Re-Exploitation: Empowering Approaches to Sharing the Message About Human Trafficking,” *Journal of Human Trafficking* 2, no. 3 (August 2017): 327-334.

³ These concepts are explored further in the Methodology section of this paper. However, to introduce them briefly, participatory photography dates from Paulo Freire and his team using cameras in their literacy project in a *barrio* in Lima, Peru in 1973. Ethical storytelling encapsulates a more contemporary focus on “a new standard of storytelling” that adopts a do-no-harm approach to grant subjects agency in attempts to represent their experiences. See: <https://photovoice.org> and <http://ethicalstorytelling.com>.

⁴ Of these sixteen participants, fifteen chose to share and disseminate their stories and images from this project. As such, the analytical focus of all subsequent work will focus only on the work of the fifteen participants who have consented to sharing it. All participants were compensated for their participation, regardless of whether or not they chose to share their final outputs.

We sought to employ these methodologies to help understand the experience of survivors of human trafficking in Kenya, engage them more meaningfully in anti-trafficking work and provide an evidence base for questions around whether ethically-sourced narratives which may or may not fit the expected arc or trope could engage the general public. Our project started in October 2019, running throughout 2020. Concerns about ethical practice were paramount, and exacerbated by the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. This project can justifiably claim to be truly trauma-informed and survivor-led, as the project was suspended until survivors independently requested it resume.

We found that using these approaches did empower survivors. One interesting finding is how these arts-based methodologies, and engaging in research, gave survivors a way of escaping the pandemic and its effects on their lives, providing them with meaningful activity and a community. Our project shows that it is possible to conduct participatory, ethical work remotely, even during a pandemic, though this entails a considerable commitment of time from both participants and researchers.

In this article, we first describe the context in which this research was conducted, define the methodological framework used, and outline the methods used within the project. Then we analyse participants' stories and photographs, and feedback gathered in evaluation forms to reflect the experience of those involved in the project in more detail to explore how participants engaged with these methodologies, and how researchers facilitated that, remotely. Lastly we share some reflections on what we learned about the use of these methodologies, and recommendations for future work, particularly working remotely in an equitable, ethical, and participatory way with survivors of human trafficking.

Context

Our original team comprised researchers at the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab (RL), survivors of human trafficking, service providers working with Awareness Against Human Trafficking (HAART) in Kenya, experts in ethical storytelling and participatory photography, and staff at Worldreader (WR) and Worldreader Kenya (WRK) (who agreed to publish any stories participants created on their free, digital e-reader platform⁵). The project was co-designed by Kenyan and UK researchers, a relationship initially facilitated by Minh Dang of the RL and Survivor Alliance (SA). Survivors in Kenya were the focus, not because human trafficking is a problem unique to Kenya (or absent from the UK), but because Kenyan members of the team were already working with survivors who could be ethically approached to participate, and are experts in the relevant methodologies.

Human Trafficking in Kenya

According to the United States Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report 2020), Kenya is classed as being in 'Tier 2'.⁶ Kenya was praised for 'significantly increasing the number of victims identified', but concerns were raised over a 'decrease in investigations, prosecutions, and convictions,' and the prosecution of cases as immigration or labour law violations rather than crimes under anti-trafficking law; the fact that victims were still often treated as criminals; and a lack of 'availability of protective services for adult and foreign victims'.⁷ Some of these issues were raised in earlier reports, which particularly emphasised

⁵ This element of the research is still on-going, due to delays caused by COVID-19.

⁶ Tier 2 countries are those whose governments do not fully comply with all of TVPA's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards. Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State, *2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Kenya*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/kenya/>. Accessed 19 February 2021.

⁷ *Ibid.*

the need for the Kenyan government to improve support and protection for adult victims, potential victims and survivors.

The Global Slavery Index (GSI) gives the Kenyan government a 5/10 response rating.⁸ In particular, it highlights a lack of national campaigns to provide information to the public about how to report and identify victims; concerns over the accessibility of reporting mechanisms; gaps in the provision of support services for all victims of human trafficking, particularly in terms of providing long-term support; a lack of training for all staff providing direct victim assistance, and a more general lack of guidance for relevant officials and ‘first-responders’, or evaluation of responses; that foreign victims are detained or deported for immigration violations; and some questions over the proportionality of criminal penalties. More positively, the report also highlights that Kenya has a national reporting mechanism and referral system, which does guide survivors to relevant support; that training is given to likely ‘first-responders’, such as the judiciary and prosecutors; that support (including free legal support) is available for victims, which the government helps fund; that NGOs and government are both involved in a national coordination body; and that there is a National Action Plan. Within this context, HAART works to support those who have survived human trafficking through a programme designed to prevention, protection, prosecution and partnerships.

COVID-19 in Kenya

The novel coronavirus COVID-19 was confirmed to have reached Kenya on 13 March 2020.⁹ The first death was recorded on 26 March, when a man who had recently returned to Kenya from Eswatini via Johannesburg passed away. In response, the government brought in a range of restrictions and regulations. These included recommending hand-washing; social-distancing; suspension of public gatherings; travel restrictions; closure of bars, nightclubs and shopping malls; restricting restaurants to take-away only; closure of schools and places of worship; a ban on weddings, and limiting attendance at funerals; directing public officials and businesspeople to work at home unless employed in essential services; imposing a dusk-till-dawn curfew; and dislodging people from informal settlements.¹⁰ Restrictions began to ease, slowly, from July 2020 as the peak in cases dramatically dropped (before rising again in November 2020).

According to the Kenyan Ministry of Health, by 23 February 2021, Kenya had a total of 104,500 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 85,665 confirmed recoveries and 1,837 confirmed deaths¹¹. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), Kenya had 103,993 cumulative cases as of 21 February 2021 (a rate of 193.4 per 100 thousand population) and 1,817 cumulative deaths (a rate of 3.3 per 100 thousand population).¹²

⁸ Global Slavery Index, Walk Free Foundation, *Country Data 2019: Kenya*,

<https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2019/data/country-data/kenya/>, Accessed 3 February 2021.

⁹ Ministry of Health, “First Case of Coronavirus Disease Confirmed in Kenya,” *Ministry of Health*, 13 March 2020, <https://www.health.go.ke/first-case-of-coronavirus-disease-confirmed-in-kenya/> Accessed 19 February 2021.

¹⁰ VOA News, “Kenya Taking Drastic Measures to Curb Coronavirus Spread,” *VOA News*, 28 March 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/kenya-taking-drastic-measures-curb-coronavirus-spread>, Accessed 20 April 2021; Human Rights Watch, “Kenya: Quarantine Conditions Undermine Rights,” *Human Rights Watch*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/28/kenya-quarantine-conditions-undermine-rights>, Accessed 20 April 2021.

¹¹ Ministry of Health, “COVID-19 Update,” *Ministry of Health*, <https://www.health.go.ke/>, Accessed 25 February 2021.

¹² At the time of submission, the WHO had not updated this data to reflect the Kenyan Ministry of Health’s statistics. However, this data is still useful for providing a comparative framework for other countries. “COVID-19 Weekly Epidemiological Update 28”, *World Health Organisation*, 21 February 2021,

Country (Alphabetical Order)	Cumulative Cases	Cumulative Cases per 100 thousand population	Cumulative deaths	Cumulative deaths per 100 thousand.
Ethiopia	151,857	132.1	2,271	2.0
Kenya	103,993	193.4	1,817	3.3
Somalia	5,589	37.1	194	1.2
South Sudan	6,417	57.3	85	0.8
Tanzania	509	0.9	21	0.0
Uganda	40,199	87.9	333	0.7

Fig 1. COVID-19 confirmed cases and deaths (Source: WHO data).

Table 1 shows Kenya's COVID-19 statistics (according to the WHO) in the context of those countries which border it. Of these countries, Kenya has fared the worst in terms of cumulative deaths per 100 thousand and cumulative cases per 100 thousand. However, Ethiopia has seen a higher count of both cumulative cases and cumulative deaths. The WHO calculates there have been 2,789,965 total cases in Africa, with 71,204 deaths.¹³ In the Africa region, only Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Algeria report more than 100,000 total cases.¹⁴ Kenya's director general of public health announced on 7 January 2021 that Kenya would start receiving 24 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine in February.¹⁵ In February 2021, the Kenyan Ministry of Health said that it would vaccinate 1.25 million people between February and July, entering a second phase of vaccinations from July 2021 to June 2022.¹⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the lives of the participants involved in this project. Before commencing the project, eight of the participants were interviewed regarding their current situation and the pressures that they faced in daily life. Their responses highlight the direct consequences of the pandemic on survivors of human trafficking in Kenya. Of the participants questioned, all of them stated that COVID-19 had damaged them economically or financially. 87.5% of surveyed participants had lost their primary source of income due to the pandemic. There were also physical and mental health concerns – many of the survivors were concerned about their physical health, and most of them experienced poor mental health because of the pandemic. Several of them repeated feeling isolated, anxious and/or depressed. All the participants also acknowledged that their responsibilities had changed during the pandemic, with most of them stating that they had increased.

The research team, too, were affected as individuals by the pandemic, both in Kenya and the UK. As such, we entered into this project with an understanding of the intense pressures of the

<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-epidemiological-update---23-february-2021>, Accessed 1 March 2020.

¹³ World Health Organisation Africa, "Coronavirus (COVID-19)," *WHO Africa*, <https://www.afro.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus-covid-19> Accessed 21 February 2021.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Reuters Staff, "Kenya expects 24 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to start arriving next month," *Reuters*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-kenya-idUSKBN29C1GS>, Accessed 20 April 2021.

¹⁶ APO Group, "Coronavirus – Kenya: COVID-19 update (12 February 2021)," *Africanews*, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/02/13/coronavirus-kenya-covid-19-update-12-february-2021/>, Accessed 30 February 2021.

COVID-19 pandemic on the participants, and were prepared to be led by them in how best to support them during this project.

Methodological Framework

Our methodology is a survivor-led participatory research practice, which combines participatory photography with ethical storytelling. Although the two methodologies are inherently complementary, this project makes a significant intervention in the field of participatory research practice by consciously using both techniques. Participatory photography combines taking photographs, subsequent discussion with practitioners and participants and distribution of imagery to empower participants, as ‘the photograph’s narrative becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, community discussion, and action’.¹⁷ Collaborative workshops, wherein participants learn the skills of the camera, take photographs, discuss their meaning and then share them with the wider public, are of fundamental importance to this approach. Of course, this approach is not without its potential limitations. For one, there are inherent power dynamics when institutional funding is involved, which may limit the participants “right to fail.”¹⁸ In other words, a survivor may feel pressured to produce work that they are unhappy with in order to satisfy external requirements, such as funder expectations. Yet when practitioners are sensitive to these potential issues, participatory photography nevertheless poses a challenge to exploitative image cultures that continue to dominate depictions of human trafficking.¹⁹

Ethical storytelling naturally complements this, as it grants the survivors who choose to tell their stories ultimate agency over them. Indeed, Singhal et al acknowledge the potential of participatory photography as a storytelling tool, noting that, “in essence, by placing cameras in the hands of people, a facilitator or researcher can gain insights into people’s lived experiences, which were previously overlooked, rejected, or silenced.”²⁰ Yet this methodology does not just benefit the researcher, it also empowers the participants. Whilst ethical storytelling is a newer concept, and hence more difficult to define, Paul Gready summarises this idea: “the ‘responsibility to the story’ is not a one-off event, but a process spanning the telling and the representation and the reception of the telling”.²¹ As such, ethical storytelling privileges a survivor voice that is actively participating throughout the entire process, evoking ideas of dynamic consent that may shift and change. Hence, we felt that bringing these methodologies together had the power to create a new mode of ethical, survivor-orientated representation. This is still our primary concern, though COVID-19 has revealed new challenges (technical and theoretical) for both.

¹⁷ A. Singhal, L.M. Harter, K. Chitnis, and D. Sharma, “Participatory Photography as Theory, Method and Praxis: Analyzing an Entertainment-Education Project in India,” *Critical Arts* 21, no. 1 (2007): 212-227, 217.

¹⁸ John Fleetwood interviewed by Jacklynne Hobbs, “Ethical riddles, linear agendas and assumed positions: A perspective on participatory photography projects from the Market Photo Workshop,” in *Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice*, ed. Terry Kurgan (Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2015).

¹⁹ Whilst a survey of problematic image culture as it pertains to human trafficking is beyond the scope of this paper, an overview of this issue and of the efforts of NGO’s employing participatory methodologies to counter this can be seen: Emily Brady, *Photographing Modern Slavery: Recommendations for Responsible Practice* (Rights Lab, 2019).

²⁰ Singhal et al, “Participatory Photography as Theory, Method and Praxis,” 217.

²¹ Paul Gready, “Introduction: ‘Responsibility to the Story,’” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2, no. 2 (July 2010): 177-190, 184.

Project Method

Our approach was survivor-informed, so our processes were always subject to change depending on the feedback of participants. Pre-pandemic, we had planned to hold in-person workshops, the exact content and structure of which would be participant-led. This planned flexibility, integral to our method, meant we were well-placed to conduct our research once we had negotiated the difficulties of moving the workshops online. After careful discussion around the ethics of online workshops and participant safety, we planned a ‘remote’, online-only approach. Yasmin Manji secured participant consent remotely via Google Meet and WhatsApp, following our pre-existing protocols for ensuring consent was free and fully informed. Sophie Otiende, Rehema Baya and Aisha Ali Haji conducted a series of remote workshops with sixteen female survivors of human trafficking aged between 22 and 45 and living in either Nairobi or Mombasa from August 2020 to December 2020. These took place via smartphones, on Zoom, and were supported by WhatsApp groups. These were supplemented with individual, one-to-one meetings, which also took place across Zoom and WhatsApp according to the preference of the participant.

The sixteen participants were divided into three smaller groups (two of 5 and one of 6), according to geographic proximity to each other. This kept the communal spirit of participatory methodology, whilst ensuring that participants would not be overwhelmed or struggle to participate in an online space. These groups served as the primary forum for discussion amongst participants, which allowed them to reflect on and share their experiences adapting the “subsequent discussion” of participatory photography. It also provided a written record for participants to reflect on their own changing attitudes to the project.

Participants were already known to, and working with, HAART, and Manji (a trained counsellor) determined that they were at a suitable position in their recovery to benefit from participation in this project. Survivors were selected from HAART's group of survivors, using a trauma-informed approach. We as practitioners decided that it was important to select survivors that had already received support and had graduated from HAART's program. We understood that it was possible for survivors to choose the stories of their experience and we wanted to reduce harm by ensuring we selected survivors that were not actively processing trauma. In turn, workshops in Kenya were overseen by Otiende, who is herself both an expert and a survivor, compounding our survivor-led approach at every level of the project. Additionally, other key members of the research team, including the Photographic Consultant (Baya) and the Storytelling Consultant (Ali Haji) had experience of working with survivors before, compounding our do-no-harm approach. Workshops were also held in both Swahili and English, as the practitioners were able to communicate in either language to suit the needs of participants.

Participants had previously been equipped with smartphones as part of HAART's partnership with SA and the Walk Free Foundation. We were able to supply data bundles and phone credit to researchers and participants, as well as building in time for Baya to learn about the phone's camera so she could teach the participants how to use it to the best advantage. The phone model was Opal A1-12, and all devices were pre-installed with Google Meet, Zoom, WPS Reader, Google Drive, Gmail and WhatsApp.

Through the workshops, participants were invited to engage thematically with the impact of COVID-19 on their lived experience as a survivor of human trafficking. Workshops were planned for the whole group, alongside the three WhatsApp groups. Alongside this communication, the HAART team was also able to host training sessions and meetings over Google Meet and Zoom, as well as keeping in touch with UK-based team members via Microsoft Teams. There were also many one-to-one conversations via WhatsApp between

individual participants, Ali Haji and Baya – indeed, many more than we had anticipated, which reflects the need to adjust in ‘remote’ working to the needs of participants. Overall, practitioners judged that technology failed approximately 3% of the time (including connection issues or power outages), which indicates minimal interruption. Indeed, holding in-person meetings would have most likely also had at least minimal disruption due to external factors such as transport issues, and therefore these technological disruptions can be understood as negligible.

Final copies of the images and stories (“finality” being determined by the participants) were shared with the RL team via Microsoft Teams, Google Drive and Microsoft OneDrive. Workshops included discussions over the potential implications of image creation and image sharing, and all files were anonymised or pseudonymised, with some participants choosing different pseudonyms for different creative tasks. Relatedly, Zoom proved to have a useful advantage for working with survivors in that participants could change their own names – we adopted a practice of everyone using initials of their own choosing. Upon finalising their materials, participants were invited to provide feedback on the project through both one-to-one meetings and a Project Evaluation form, excerpts from which are used in this paper. Of the sixteen project participants, fifteen chose to share their stories and images after the project concluded. Of the fifteen prose-pieces, twelve were written in English and three were written in Swahili.

Findings

Our findings from this project are two-fold. Firstly, we have findings regarding the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of human trafficking in Kenya focus on the materials produced by the participants. Although we had independently ascertained that the impact of the pandemic on the survivors was severe, for the majority of participants the project instead functioned as a space within which to escape this reality, and most participants did not directly or overtly chronicle, or mention, the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. Secondly, we have findings regarding the use of these methods with survivors of human trafficking, and the potential for their wider use in future. These include the survivor-led alterations of this project; the use of participatory research methods during a global pandemic; and how the participants moulded the methods to accommodate both their artistic visions and their lived realities of working within the limitations of COVID-19.

Impact of COVID-19 on Survivors of Human Trafficking in Kenya

In this section we explore five elements of the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of human trafficking in Kenya as revealed in our research project: the impetus it gave survivors to prompt a re-start of the project; the topic of the prose pieces produced; the contrast between these and the participant’s experience of COVID-19; and the impact on the photographs taken by participants (including who was included, and in what roles).

First, it is worth noting that one impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on survivors was the suspension of the project, and direct calls from participants for it to resume. One participant stated, “During COVID, being idle was really difficult on my family life and mental wellbeing. This project has given me something to do and not be idle.” We had been concerned that running this project during the pandemic risked re-traumatising survivors. However, it transpired that what survivors were finding re-traumatising was being at home, and that writing really helped them cope. As many in-person support networks had been removed by the pandemic, survivors were actively seeking a means of engaging with the HAART community and seeking out new support networks. With the instability of the pandemic, the project

therefore offered a consistent, albeit virtual, space wherein survivors could engage with a wider community in an empowering manner.

Before re-commencing the project, we hypothesised the likely outcomes of the project in terms of survivor outputs, expecting participants to tell narratives about the direct impact of COVID-19 on their lives and to take photographs that evidenced it. Interviews with participants had demonstrated that the pandemic had severely impacted their economic, mental and social wellbeing. A somewhat surprising outcome of our research is that most of them did not mention COVID-19 – the majority instead choosing to set their written work in settings which either pre-date pandemic-times or simply do not reference it.²² Whether they actively stated that they did not want to address the pandemic, or merely chose to omit without discussion, the practitioners were led by the desires of the participants and did not pressure them to include the pandemic. One way of interpreting this is that although COVID-19 appeared to dominate many elements of our lives in 2020, it is clear that it did not entirely dominate most of our participants' imaginations or distract their attention from the messages and stories they wanted to share. Another way of interpreting this absence of the pandemic is as a deliberate attempt to “escape” the dominating reality of COVID-19. As one participant noted, “for a few hours, I get to stop thinking about all the problems I have and focus on something interesting.” Within this project, freed from the demand to recount *their* story (whether as a means of gathering necessary evidence for law enforcement, lawmakers or researchers, or as a means of emotionally impacting potential donors, policymakers and other people with power), many participants chose to create fictional works. This signals another way in which survivors, and survivor involvement, may be being curtailed in the anti-trafficking movement, as there seems to be a sense both that survivors should tell their own story, and that they will want to (perhaps as their key, or only, contribution to anti-trafficking work). Furthermore, the research project ultimately provided an outlet during the pandemic, demonstrating the need for dynamic survivor engagement in times of international crisis and for flexibility on the part of researchers when engaging in participatory methods.

This is not to say, however, that all participants uniformly chose not to consider COVID-19 in their stories, nor to overtly comment on the pandemic's impact on their lives. One narrative contains the following paragraph, near the culmination of the story:

In January 2020, HAART financially empowered me to start my own business as a mobile make-up artist. My business was picking up well, and I had slowly started to support myself. I started dreaming about bringing my son to Kenya. Unfortunately due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is extremely difficult for me to continue operating my mobile make-up services. This covid [sic] situation has also affected my healing since I am home 24/7 sometimes with nothing to eat, worrying about my son back home and wondering why life is doing this to me. It has been so hard that at some point I even thought of being an actual sex worker because what's left to protect really? Covid [sic] has brought back so much anger, bitterness and I feel like the reopened wounds are turning into self hate because I can't even date, not to talk of considering being an actual sex worker after everything that happened to me. – Shivan, My Hustle.

Within this passage, Shivan powerfully highlights the individual hardships that she has faced as a direct consequence of COVID-19. The character within her story has faced economic uncertainty, food insecurity, mental health concerns and isolation as a result of the pandemic. From a period of empowerment as a mobile makeup artist in January 2020, by December 2020 the main character struggles with “self hate.” As such, Shivan provides a window into how the COVID-19 pandemic risks undermining the work done by NGOs in supporting survivors and that further support is needed. Furthermore, this direct confrontation of the

²² Of the material printed in English, only 1 of twelve stories overtly references COVID-19.

hardships of COVID-19, when contrasted with other participants' omissions, demonstrates the importance of not considering participatory outputs as a uniform, monolithic set of work. Rather, the work produced mirrors the diversity of experience of the participants themselves. Indeed, Shivan does not give in to despair in her narrative, ending on an empowering note:

But deep down I know that I have survived the worst, I know I survived death itself and
I know that I am stronger than my trauma, so I will survive till I start living again. –
Shivan, My Hustle.

From the initial participant interviews, conducted before the workshops, it is possible to see consistencies between Shivan's experience and those of the other participants. All of the participants had reported being severely economically affected by COVID-19, with nearly all of them losing any regular employment or income. The mental health concerns raised by Shiva also resonate with the experiences of survivors raised in interviews, who also reported loneliness, sadness, and anxiety. However, only Shivan chose to engage with the pandemic directly. This serves as a reminder that whilst the impact of COVID-19 on the participants was universally severe, when utilising participatory methodologies researchers cannot – and should not – dictate the content of any final outputs. As people react to trauma in different ways, a truly trauma-informed and survivor-led project should not force or coerce participants to confront topics they wish to escape (such as the COVID-19 pandemic).



Fig. 2. Photography by Bigeni, 2020.

The photographs were created to complement the stories produced by the participants. The photography also demonstrates the impact of COVID-19 on the participants in this pandemic. In these images, we see the participants moulding their immediate surroundings into scenes from their stories, and casting those around them as characters. Unable to travel or gather groups of people to help, instead the women in this project mould their close relationships into their photography. In some images, the women play themselves. In others, they use their children to represent a person of a younger age (see Figure 2). This has the unintended consequence of incorporating a familial, community-orientated aspect to the project, as the participant shares their experiences with those around them and invites them to participate in the recreation of their stories – but on their own terms, with the participant in control. One participant reported that the project benefited her “family life and mental wellbeing.” As such, although COVID-19 had limited the scope of what images these women could take, this project demonstrates how the participants used their personal, intimate networks to shape their participation in this project.

Taking a Participatory Approach in a Pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we intended to conduct this project in a survivor-led manner, utilising the methodologies of participatory photography and ethical storytelling. Once the COVID-19 pandemic effectively made in-person meetings impossible, the project was adapted online at the behest of the participants. In so doing, the participants themselves altered the project methods to not just suit their lived realities of the pandemic, but to empower them in ways that would have had relevance even if the sessions were run in-person. Notable methodological adaptations include: (1) using technology to facilitate remote working, (2) the development of fictitious narratives, (3) attaining consent remotely, (4) increased number of one-on-one sessions, (5) changes to group size, (6) language, and (7) combining the transferable skills of photography and storytelling. These adaptations were tracked throughout the process and demonstrate how an adaptable and survivor-led approach to research can be accommodated without conflicting with the project aims or objectives.

Technology

All participants were provided with an Opal A1-12 phone, which was chosen on account of its high-quality camera and ability to use all of the required apps for the projects. The software was chosen after discussion and experimentation with participants, who ultimately favoured the technology that they were already familiar with and used in their daily lives. As such, the project utilised such software as Google Meet, Zoom, WPS Reader, Google Drive, email and WhatsApp. As noted above, one particularly noteworthy choice was the decision to use Zoom. The participants of this project preferred this software due to its easy interface and – crucially – its function to allow participants to easily change their own name. This allowed the participants an active role in the protection of their real identities.

Remote working during the project was met with varied responses from participants, according to their final feedback forms.²³ Whilst all agreed to take part in the digital workshops, as to do so in person would have been impossible, there remains an individual preference on potential future workshops. Some participants found the online workshops preferable, noting that it made childcare and work easier. In the final feedback session, one survivor noted that the online format enabled them “to learn and make a living at the same time.” However, others felt that

²³ In their feedback interviews, participants were asked to reflect on both what they thought worked well in the project, and what could be improved in future. Of the sixteen participants, four stated a preference for online workshops in future, whilst another three praised the online format.

they missed out on an increased sense of community that would have come from face-to-face interactions, because they could “share a lot and build each other up, and could do away with fear and do a lot of things together.” The potential benefits and drawbacks of both physical and online workshops should be factored in to subsequent research projects.

Employing fictional techniques

Initially the project was conceived to allow participants the opportunity to tell their own stories and convey their own personal experiences of human trafficking. However, it emerged early into the project that some participants would have found the act of retelling their own story retraumatising. It quickly became apparent to the practitioners that just because participants did not want to tell their own story did not mean that they had nothing to say about human trafficking. Rather than removing them from the project, therefore, the boundaries of the project were shifted to encapsulate a fictitious element, allowing for participants to create characters and events outside of their lived realities that nonetheless conveyed their emotional reaction to the issue.

It was noted that some participants did not yet feel ready to share their personal stories. However, it seems these fictional stories were still rooted in their own experiences, and our expert storyteller deliberately tried to nurture the participants’ ability to tell a fictional story which was also their own. Instead of forcing a research agenda, the practitioners respected the participant’s right to assert themselves through fiction. Indeed, this incorporation of fictitious elements can be understood as part of this project’s intended outcome of providing a respite or escape from daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Securing Informed Consent

Gaining the informed consent of participants posed particular challenges in an online environment, as many participants did not have access to technology that would allow them to physically sign paperwork (e.g., a printer and scanner). Therefore, we adapted our usual procedures for securing informed consent to online/ “on-phone” working, via one-to-one phone, Google Meet and WhatsApp conversations with a trained counsellor, and WhatsApp group discussions among participants and researchers. Multiple approaches were taken, including participants typing “I consent” in chat boxes after being informed about the project, and participating in phone calls where they are recorded stating their name and consent. In this way, the practitioners were able to inform the participants about the project and record their consent without compromising either the ethics of the project or the wellbeing of the participants during the pandemic.

Group size

In the original conception of this project, in which workshops would be held in-person, it was originally conceived that five or six participants would be involved in this project. The participants were to be compensated for their time, expertise and travel expenses. However, with the reduction in costs as a result of the pandemic (e.g., no travel costs, no room hire) it became apparent that the project could not only redistribute those additional costs to pay participants more, but also recruit a much wider pool of participants. We increased the number of participants to sixteen, which also allowed us to encompass a broader geographic reach than physical workshops would have accommodated.

One-to-One Sessions

The methodology of participatory photography relies on using both group and individual sessions with participants. Group sessions facilitate group discussions and a sense of community, whilst one-on-one sessions create a confidential space for reflection and allow for discussion of individual well-being. This project always intended to cultivate both of these

spaces, however the shift to online workshops cultivated slightly different dynamics to those originally envisioned. The group lessons provided a space for participants to learn new skills and to share their work, which did indeed cultivate a space for community and connection. However, the survivor-led demand for individual sessions and feedback became higher than originally intended, which was likely due to both the isolation of the pandemic and the added desire to not appear to not understand material raised in group discussion – something which was perhaps due to working digitally, where there is less ability to have a private conversation with a session convenor than in in-person workshops.

Often these queries took on technical dimensions, and reflected to some extent differences in existing familiarity with the devices being used. There were occasions where participants did not understand – and/or did not want to admit they did not understand – the specific task or concept they were to work on offline (e.g., a particular photography or writing exercise). In particular, when engaged in group meetings, individuals were less likely to express uncertainty about a task. This led to the need for many more individual sessions, and to giving more individualised feedback, than we had originally expected. This need should be reflected in future projects working remotely with participants.

Language

One of the strengths, as we saw it, of partnering with WR is that they host reading material in a wide range of languages on their platform – their goal being to encourage literacy, which is almost impossible without accessible, age-appropriate, interesting literature available in a language one can read. We had discussed how to facilitate in-person workshops where participants might speak more than one language, and particularly where they might prefer not to speak in English (the common language of all the research team). We had some concern that, if all the narratives produced with in Swahili, this would cause complications for the UK members of the team when they came to analyse them.

In the workshops, it quickly became apparent that some of the participants felt more comfortable using Swahili, and as the practitioners were able to speak both languages, they were able to use both in the workshops. This emphasised the importance of using local networks of people who not only understood the language, but cultural aspects unique to localised contexts such as social cues. However, not all participants could speak Swahili, and so we also incorporated a translator into the workshops to help facilitate them. This was somewhat easier to do using online platforms rather than being in-person – as additional costs such as transportation were kept to a minimum, and travel time for a translator did not need to be factored into planning – but it still meant that everything had to be explained twice. This impacted the length of the workshops and the design of the syllabus for the photographic and storytelling learning activities. However, it was also noted that this willingness to be flexible in terms of language, and that the practitioners and researchers leading the workshop could switch between English and Swahili was improving communication between participants and researchers, as it reflected a willingness and ability to respond to their needs, increasing trust and a sense of egalitarian participation and community. From this, we are led to conclude that future projects of a similar nature should consider the power dynamics of running a project using a particular language and allocate funding to allow for flexibility within this approach, particularly if not conducted within a cost-minimising context (i.e. remotely).

Combining Methodologies

A significant intervention that this project makes is in the combination of participatory storytelling and photographic methodologies. Whilst participatory photography often incorporates a degree of writing to contextualise the photograph, here story and photography work in tandem to convey the participants' perspectives. Whilst the project had anticipated that

this would produce powerful work, the relationships between participants, stories and photographs took on unique forms that could not have been foreseen. We found that the writing element was therapeutic, and the photography element was empowering. During the upheaval and stress of COVID-19, alongside the diminished support networks available, this empowerment became all the more important to survivor well-being. Furthermore, combining these methods allowed for unforeseen nuances to the project. This further cultivated transferable skills for the participants, as some were able to utilise their photographic skills in their everyday lives, for instance to help promote their own businesses. This became all the more important during the economic precarity of COVID-19.

Conclusion

This research project demonstrates that during the COVID-19 pandemic, participatory methodologies that privileged participant wellbeing had a positive impact on the communities and individuals with which they engaged. The participants created a powerful archive of images and stories that conveyed their lived experiences of human trafficking, and their strength in overcoming it. By calling for the resumption of this project, participants asserted their right to express themselves, cultivate communities and develop skills to assist in survivor leadership. The work produced demonstrates how the project did not produce monolithic, homogenous work, as some participants chose to place their work outside of the context of COVID-19, whilst participants such as Shivan acknowledged the pandemic's continuing impact on their lives.

In the act of producing prose and photographs, the participants transformed the methodological approaches adopted by this project, adapting them from the hypothetical and academic to the practical and realistic. Therefore, whilst participatory research practices can undoubtedly be empowering for survivors, successful implementation of these methods can only be achieved if practitioners and researchers are willing to cede control of the project. Flexibility of aims, processes and outputs are important in all survivor engagement, but take on particular urgency in a pandemic. As such, future projects of this nature should allocate costs to allow for unexpected adjustments, and funding bodies should move towards a more sensitive understanding of the flexible nature of truly ground-breaking research.

This said, our research shows that working in these ways is possible in a pandemic. Much can be achieved – in terms of building a community and producing new tools – to further anti-trafficking work, even in these difficult and isolating circumstances. This is an important lesson in a world which continues to feel the impact of COVID-19, and may face similar events that would disrupt in-person work in the future. Although we often feel digital working is “second-best” to in-person work, where it feels easier to forge communities and engage in robust ethical research, our work shows that with the right kinds of support (and where there is sufficient will from all involved), remote working need not be inferior. Rather, remote working can empower participants to tell their own stories in their own words for all the world to see. As Caroline states in the final words of her story:

No one knew the things she had endured like her, her flaws told her story and had been her badge for a long time but now all she was hoping was to rewrite the script, accept her flaws and appreciate her gifts and most of all be proud of how well the two fit together. – Caroline, The Contempt in Her Crooked Smile.

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