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THE CONVERSATION

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One of thousands of young boys forced to work Ghana's fishing industry, often given to fishermen by their impoverished families. Tugela Ridley/EPA

Modern slavery: how a drama project in Ghana educates communities through the stories of survivors

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An estimated 40.3 million people around the world are trapped in slavery. One in four victims are children, with women and girls affected most. Modern slavery occurs when people are forced to work through violence and intimidation.

According to the most recent figures from the Global Slavery Index, there are 133,000 people living in slavery in Ghana. Our ongoing research seeks to tackle the issue by using performance to bridge the gap between survivors and people at risk of becoming victims by developing a conversation about 21st-century slavery.

How the Ghanaian government responds to this issue affects the amount of international aid the country receives. In 2017, in response to concerns it was not doing enough to combat the problem – and facing a cut in international aid – the Ghanaian government produced a national plan, which outlined what needed to be done to address the growing issue.



James Town's Act for Change team. Stephen Collins/ UWS

In 2018, I began working with Act for Change, a community performance company based in in Jamestown, an area in Ghana's capital Accra, led by Collins Seymah Smith, Josephine Quaynor and Nii Kwaterlai Quartey (pictured above). The aim of our newly published research was to investigate ways in which the arts could contribute to the fight against modern slavery.

To do this, we interviewed survivors from Jamestown and developed their stories into a performance which was shown in local communities, reaching more than 1,000 people.

A taboo issue

Modern slavery and human trafficking are often characterised as global issues. But these issues are also very local. Debate in Ghana is dominated by discussions of children working on cocoa farms and in mining, but we found three distinct forms of slavery around Jamestown that highlight different problems.

First, there are young boys being taken from the community into the fishing industry further north; second, young girls are being brought into Jamestown to work in the sex trade; and third, girls leaving school are being trafficked to the Gulf states for domestic service.

Family and community life have a real impact on how and whether people fall victim to slavery. Survivors we spoke to said that they had been enticed through a close contact, friend or sometimes even a family member who had encouraged them with the promise of a better life.

But slavery is a taboo subject in Jamestown because there is an expectation that people must grasp opportunities where they can. So the experiences of survivors are rarely heard in communities, and many don't feel the need to question these offers of travel, money or support.

Despite Jamestown being a close-knit community, the survivors we interviewed all spoke of feeling isolated when they came home. This was particularly the case with women returning from the Gulf states. Though some had suffered terrible abuse, the fact that they had travelled abroad gave the false impression that they were wealthy, and so those around them were not interested in hearing about the negative aspects of their experience.

This has a double impact: it isolates the survivors but it also prevents their experience being communicated to other people potentially at risk from slavery. This really guided our project and in the next phase we set about bringing people together to discuss the realities of slavery in the 21st century.

Practicing Freedom | NF Films



Exploring slavery through performance

Having identified that slavery in Jamestown has distinctly local characteristics, what was clearly lacking was community involvement in developing a response.

This is where performance as a tool for promoting a community conversation became essential to our project on a number of levels. First, we were able to use the Jamestown Community Theatre Centre as a space to bring people together to watch and share stories.

Initially, we used a personal testimony approach, staging the words of survivors, but there was still a disconnect between survivors and the community because the audience was passively engaged rather than being part of the creative process to find solutions.

So then we brought together survivors, NGOs, schoolchildren, teachers and Act for Change members who had been involved in the research at different stages to share their skills and experiences. We spent three days in drama workshops and rehearsals, devising a performance for the community based on the experiences of slavery survivors.

In an Act for Change performance, each show runs twice. First it runs all the way through, from beginning to end. On the second run, the audience are invited to stop the action and act out solutions to the character's problem by tagging one of the actors and replacing them in the scene. The audience discuss strategies and try out different options at varying points in the play until they find one they think would work in real life.

The results were captured in an online documentary that shows the community coming together to witness the impact of slavery and actively working on ways to end it. Given the taboo around the issue, this is something that was unimaginable when we began the project.

Performance became a way for stories and experiences to be communicated, survivors empowered and communities brought together. The survivors were heard, and the community learned more about how their own friends and families could be so easily drawn into slavery, and the damaging effect it has on people's lives. Opening up in this way acknowledged the problem and in doing so, busted the taboo.



A mural on a wall in James Town. Stephen Collins/ UWS, Author provided (no reuse)

Of course, this is just one facet of a solution to the huge and complex issue of human trafficking. Listening to the experiences of survivors makes clear that solving this distressing problem will require governments, NGOs, national and international organisations and survivor-experts will need to work coherently together. They can then create more effective strategies to help communities identify and combat slavery while supporting survivors with dignity.

What performance can offer is an insight into the local experience and how it affects lives. By focusing on individual people and communicating their stories, performance provides an urgent and alternative perspective to modern slavery as a faceless mass of victims.

And critically, it provides a more relatable human narrative that reveals the plight of real people facing difficult choices compounded by economic and environmental pressures.