Survivors of modern slavery take to stage to confront global challenge

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Survivors of human trafficking have been sharing their stories on the stage. Credit: University of the West of Scotland

Survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking are taking to the stage to tell their harrowing stories as part of an innovative performance

project aimed at tackling the worldwide issue.

The project—led by University of the West of Scotland (UWS)—focuses on the experiences of survivors in Ghana; a country in which the practice is particularly prevalent.

Dr. Stephen Collins, a BA Performance lecturer and project lead, says that "modern slavery is a taboo subject in many communities in the country, meaning that detailed information about how the process works is scarce."

"This has made it challenging to tackle the problem, and its also allowed modern slavery to effectively hide in plain sight, allowing the exploitation of vulnerable people to survive."

Experts have been helping upskill people who have escaped modern slavery, empowering them share their experiences—in their own words—to at-risk communities.

The unique nature of the project has also helped researchers uncover detailed, vital information about modern slavery in Ghana—such as how the supply chains work and how survivors were recruited.

Dr. Collins added that "performance is a means of communication; and that's the aim of this project—to directly communicate with people who are at risk of modern slavery, through first-hand accounts of those who survived the practice."

The performances have taken place in communities vulnerable to trafficking.
Credit: University of the West of Scotland

Theater Practitioner and youth worker Collins Seymah Smith, who is based in Ghana, says that "modern slavery is a huge issue here in Ghana, affecting young women in particular, who are generally taken to the Gulf states on the false promise of better lives.

"In relation to child trafficking, what we've learned is that parents often give their children up to people that they trust, being told that they will be given a good education. Unfortunately, once again, these promises are false."

"Our work with survivors is helping give them a voice. They are able to tell people what happened to them as part of interactive theater experiences, allowing the audience to put themselves in their shoes, helping them learn about the very real risks that exist in our communities."

The project has also uncovered a lack of support for survivors in the country, leaving many struggling to get back on their feet.

Nii Kwartelai Quartey, Project Officer at James Town Community Theater, says that they've "learned important information, and continued to do so through the interactive nature of each show."

Young people watch a performance. Credit: University of the West of Scotland

"We like to say that our audiences aren't spectators, they're spect-actors. They are brought on stage, they are part of the performance—they make important choices that they may well have faced in real life, and learn about consequences."

"The format of these shows, in fact, has been really effective. Theater is entertaining, which means it is engaging; and what we needed to do was engage with at-risk communities."

"I am proud of what we have achieved, and I am pleased that we have been able to give people a voice, uncover important information and also open up a discussion on a hidden, but extremely common, issue."

 More information: Stephen Collins et al, The Ghost at the Junction: Exploring the Links Between Historic and Modern Slavery in Accra, Ghana, *Journal of Modern slavery* (2022). slavefreetoday.org/journal_of_ … y-in-accra-ghana.pdf

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