



## Survivor Stories

### **Dodzi Kwablavi: Orphaned Child Slavery Survivor Now Protects Her Own Child**

Story by Anna Bengel | Photos by Emily Teague

Orphaned as a baby, Dodzi was adopted by an impoverished local woman who trafficked her into fishing slavery on Lake Volta. She spent years as a labor and sexual slave. Today she is learning new skills to support her daughter in freedom.

Dodzi's parents died when she was 9 months old. She was taken under the care of a woman Dodzi came to know as her grandmother. But the woman had eight children of her own and struggled to provide for the family.

"I have never seen my parents before," Dodzi says. "Both my parents died in a mysterious way. I was left under the care of my guardian, whom I know to be my grandmother. Well, that's what I heard from the woman who took care of me."

When Dodzi was only 8 years old, she was turned over to a trafficker, a stranger who came to her village looking for children to enslave in the fishing communities along Lake Volta. Her own guardian sold her into slavery to ease the burden of poverty. The trafficker offered no upfront payment as Dodzi was taken away. But he did promise to send money on a quarterly basis in exchange for the "work" the young girl would do.



### **Labor Slavery Preys on the Poor**

Dodzi was trafficked to a village in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. For eight years she was trapped. In all that time, her guardian received one small remittance from the trafficker. This type of payment

does not mean children like Dodzi have proper jobs—she was under threat of violence and could not walk away.

Dodzi was forced to work on dangerous and deadly fishing boats—bailing out water, paddling the precarious canoe, casting out and pulling heavy nets from the water. She was also forced to prepare fish for smoking and work around the clock to provide meals for her slave holder’s entire household.



Many children are trapped in illegal fishing slavery on Lake Volta, the biggest man-made reservoir in the world. In this huge expanse of water, storms can easily capsize small vessels and kill all those aboard. Child slaves may be beaten and starved. They are forced to dive into perilous waters to retrieve tangled nets. Many never resurface. Many never go home.

### **'Not Given a Choice'**

Dodzi’s slave holder also forced her into a relationship with another enslaved boy. Their sexual enslavement resulted in the birth of a child, what Dodzi calls today “being a single mother.” When the slave holder pressured her to marry the baby’s father, Dodzi was angry and horrified.

“I actually despised the idea of getting married to one of her enslaved boys, who she claimed is hardworking and can look after me and our children,” Dodzi says. “I was not given a choice. It was a forced sexual relationship, and I don’t want to set my eyes on that boy, ever.”



## Freeing Dodzi

In the face of crippling poverty and ignorance, Ghanaian children are susceptible to being trafficked into the lucrative fishing industry that thrives illegally along the shores of Lake Volta. Free the Slaves' partner organization, International Needs Ghana (INGH), works with village child protection committees to educate communities on child trafficking, child protection violations, and the slavery that devastates Ghanaian children.

These front-line organizations provide community sensitization programs, organize meetings with faith-based groups on rights awareness, and use radio shows about modern slavery and child trafficking to reach residents of isolated villages. One of their most important outreach efforts is educating the public about the negative effects of hard labor on children.

After a series of outreach and persuasion efforts, Dodzi's slave holder released her on Sept. 9, 2016.



## A Life Without Suffering

Today Dodzi is living in freedom. She engages in normal household chores at her own choosing: washing dishes, sweeping the floor, bathing her child. FTS supports local efforts to help slavery survivors create sustainable systems of freedom. After her release, Dodzi received psychological counseling focused on relieving trauma and fostering reintegration. At a community training center,

Dodzi is learning hairdressing skills. She is enrolled in an apprenticeship that will foster financial security and help her resist re-enslavement.

“Since all my needs are being provided in terms of health care, shelter, clothing, food, and skills training—unlike when I was enslaved,” Dodzi says, “my hope for the future is that I will become economically independent to take care of my daughter.”



### **The Growing Up Free Initiative**

In June 2015 the Ghana government signed a Child Protection Compact Partnership with the United States. This partnership facilitates an investment of up to \$5 million in U.S. foreign assistance to aid the government and Ghanaian civil society in reducing child trafficking and slavery, and improving child protection throughout the country.

The initiative supports the formation and implementation of a comprehensive, integrated plan for prevention, rescue, prosecution, rehabilitation, reintegration, education, wrap-around social services, the development of market-based livelihoods for vulnerable families, and the formation of communities united in the determination to drive slavery from their midst.

Growing Up Free embodies FTS' proven Community-based Model for Fighting Slavery. Our model's core principle is to create local assets that offset the most salient vulnerabilities that lead to modern slavery: lack of awareness, the absence of strong protective community organizations, household insecurity such as poverty or illness, inadequate legal protections, and survivor vulnerability to re-enslavement.

Growing Up Free pledges to build capacity, educate and mobilize, meet basic needs, and change attitudes and practices in Ghana.



To learn more, visit [www.freetheslaves.net](http://www.freetheslaves.net) or email [Ghana@freetheslaves.net](mailto:Ghana@freetheslaves.net).