



Ethical Storytelling Toolkit

by the Antislavery Knowledge Network

This toolkit is one of the outputs from the Antislavery Knowledge Network (AKN), which between 2017-2023 supported 14 collaborative research projects through the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund. Together this work examined the power of arts and humanities to address contemporary forms of enslavement by adopting community-engaged approaches. The toolkit draws from insights and learnings from across the AKN and it was part of an exhibition showcasing all the projects, co-curated by a team led by Sophie Otiende, Allen Kiconco, and Chao Tayiana Maina, which included discussions of ethics and the value of different arts-based methods for engagement. The toolkit was authored by Sophie Otiende following discussions between the curatorial team, and is currently hosted by the Collective Threads Initiative in partnership with the University of Liverpool. For more information on the AKN partners and projects visit:

<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/politics/research/research-projects/akn/>

Introduction

This is a simple tool that strives to help practitioners who are thinking about ethical storytelling. It highlights some of the things that practitioners in the anti-slavery or -human trafficking sector need to think about to be more ethical. The tool was inspired by work done by Antislavery Knowledge Network's partners. It suggests key principles and ideas drawing from AKN partners' efforts to apply inclusive and participatory practices in their individual projects, but there is also a resources section that points to good practice and guidance from others in the sector.

Please note that context is important. Always relying on information from the particular context you're working in and the people that you are working with is crucial. This requires us as practitioners and researchers to be consistently learning and using that knowledge to think critically about the ethical issues that come up.



Background of Storytelling in Modern Slavery Work

- Modern Slavery stories have often been sensationalized, with this sensationalism being excused due to the gravity of the issue and the good intentions of campaigners.
- Stories have mainly been told from the point of view of the people that rescue and support survivors.
- When survivors' stories are told, they mainly focus on survivors' victimhood and in some cases have disregarded survivors' dignity.
- Such narratives have mainly centred on a powerless victim that requires support to escape their experience.
- There has been a huge focus on numbers – mainly the idea of understanding the overall number of people who have been trafficked /gone through modern slavery – sometimes forgetting the humanity and dignity of individual stories and people currently going through the issue.
- Sex trafficking stories are way more common than stories focusing on other forms of trafficking. This is mainly because sex trafficking stories can be easily sensationalised, while other forms of trafficking can be more ambiguous.

Why should we think about ethics in storytelling?

- Prioritisation of ethics will ensure that we are more inclusive and that our stories are more representative of the realities of exploitation and the nuanced nature of each individual experience.
- Ethics will help us avoid harm. This is important especially when working with survivors who have already gone through abuse.
- Changing the way we tell stories will also help us understand the nuances around the issue of modern slavery and enrich the way we envision interventions.
- Ethics will also ensure that the dignity and humanity of the people whose stories we are trying to tell remains central throughout the storytelling process.


Challenges and considerations when thinking about ethics

Power dynamics



There is no question that power plays a huge role in how we tell stories, who tells stories and ultimately whose stories are listened to. It is important as a storyteller embarking on storytelling to question the power dynamics that exist. These dynamics may exist as a result of:

- Race
- Education
- Class
- Age
- Gender



At any point, if you are the one writing the story, you need to reflect on the power dynamics that give you the power to write the story and strive to mitigate that power through centring survivors' voices.

How do we reduce/ check power dynamics?

- Recognise as a practitioner/ survivor-collaborator that people/survivors do not need saving/ fixing.
- Recognise that you as a storyteller do not have the power to unilaterally change things.
- Question why not everyone can write 'the story' and challenge/address the barriers that lead to that exclusion, if you can.
- Centre lived experience respectfully – this starts with the recognition that survivors/ people with lived experience have more to offer than just their narrative.
- Be prepared to learn and change direction when needed.

Resources

Good, compelling storytelling requires resources. That may mean having good cameras, or specific skills like writing and editing and access to other technology. This is not always something that communities have at their disposal.

It is important to recognise that sometimes as a storyteller, your best contribution to a project might just be to give access to resources that participants or communities might not have had access to previously.

Here are some questions to guide you when thinking about resources in ethical storytelling.

- What are some of the tools that community members/survivors do have that can be used?
- How do you acknowledge and cite community knowledge and give credit to such contributions made?
- What are some of the skills that you have that could be taught and what are some of the skills that you could learn?
- Does your project include the transfer of this knowledge?
- How have the key participants been involved in identification of resources needed in the project?

Managing trauma


When working with people with lived experience, it is important to think about trauma and avoid re-traumatisation. This is not always easy especially if the trauma narrative is at the centre of the storytelling project.

Here are some things to consider that can help when working with people who have gone through trauma.

- Question the necessity of having the trauma narrative as the centre of the project. Why is this necessary?
- Build trauma support within your project when working with people with lived experience. This might look like:
 - Debrief sessions with a mental health professional
 - Incorporating a trauma support expert within the project to advise on a trauma-informed approach
 - Mental health support for the survivors involved - can you pay for therapy or can you ensure that they have access to these services?
- Discuss at what stage (look at the diagram below) in the healing process survivors should engage in the project. This is extremely important when you think about informed consent. Only survivors/people that can freely consent should participate.

THE RESTORATIVE CARE JOURNEY





The diagram above was developed by survivor leaders from Twelve 11 Partners which is a survivor led organisation based in Austin Texas. It is important to note that sometimes this is a step by step process, and sometimes it's not. The diagram is also based on survivor leaders that go through programs supported by non-profit organisations. The path might look quite different for those who don't have access to support, or who access their support elsewhere.

It is important to note that different stages present different ethical issues when pursuing inclusion of survivors.

Here are some tools from AKN Partners that can support you when thinking about safeguarding when working with survivors and vulnerable groups.

For further reading of safeguarding and equitable partnerships:

- [Power, dignity and voice: Enhancing safeguarding in efforts to address modern slavery](#) (AKN Report)

This report includes a summary of 3 case studies:

- 1) Complexities of Safeguarding – Experience from Western Kenya
- 2) Exploring Safeguarding in James Town, Accra, Ghana
- 3) Safeguarding Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda

Ethical storytelling: A story in three parts

Most of the time while discussing ethics and storytelling, there is tendency to focus on the end product while neglecting the process. The question of ethics should be addressed throughout the *process* of storytelling. Storytelling is not an event but a process and for it to be ethical, an analysis of how ethics can be applied at each stage is important.

The three stages are:

1. Planning and conceptualisation
2. Implementation
3. Reporting and evaluation



Planning and Conceptualisation

This is the first part of storytelling and it lays the foundation for the outcome of the project. Being ethical has to start from the planning process all the way to the final product.

Here are some things to think about in the planning process:

1. Think about meaningful inclusion for the project team
2. Think about power - what are some of the ways that you are managing power dynamics?
3. Think about co-creation – what does producing together look like in the context? Is it possible to have an equal relationship? Address barriers to co-creation.
4. Think about cost. Some of the costs to be considered include: Cost of paying survivors; Cost of including capacity building processes within the project if possible; Cost of support of survivor especially if re-traumatisation is possible.
5. Think about care and safeguarding especially when working with groups that are seen as vulnerable: Is there possibility for harm? How have these possibilities been minimised? Have you developed policies to support in addressing harm?
6. Think about the process of informed consent and develop tools.

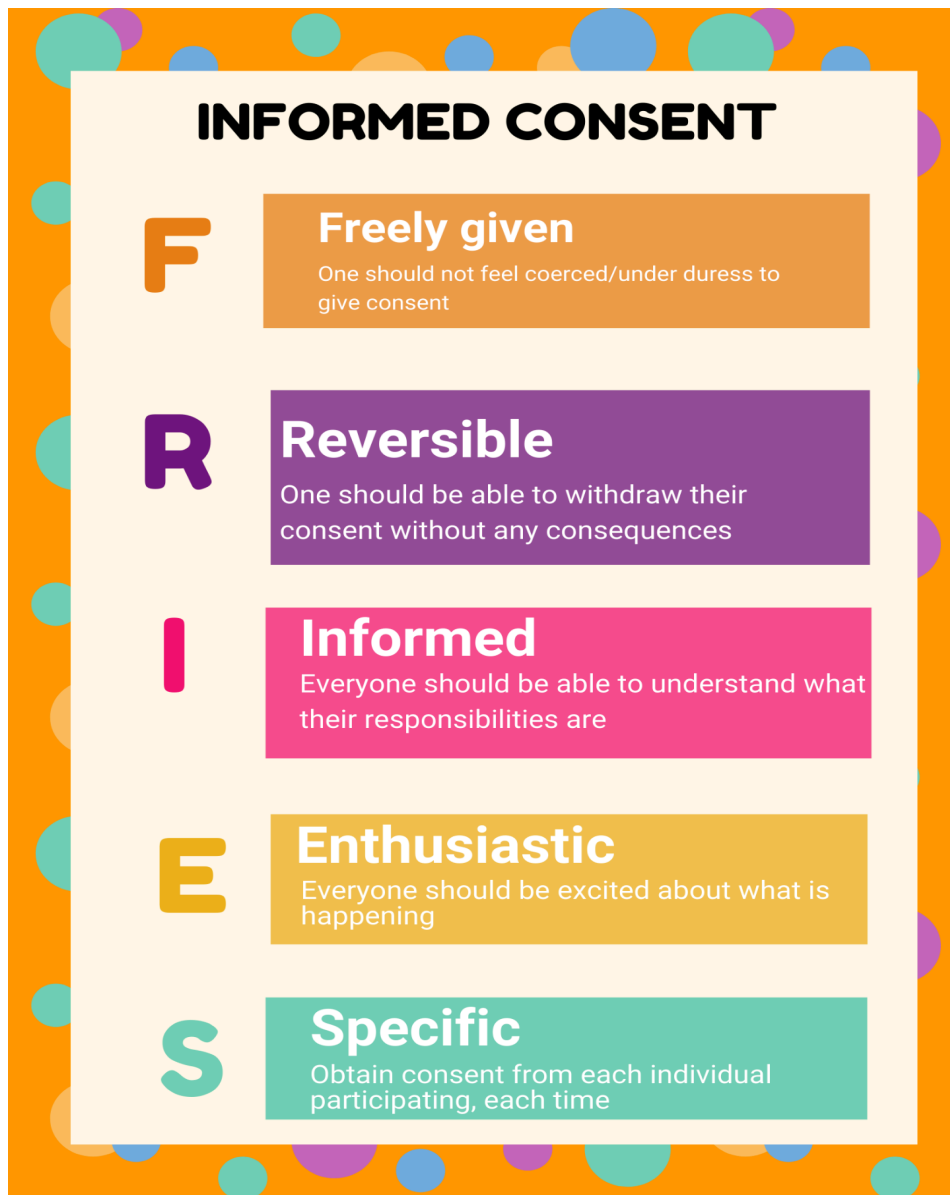
During the process or implementation phase some key elements to consider are:

- Think about documentation and adjustment of processes when faced with challenges.
- Regular debrief/coordination meetings with project partners prevents miscommunication.
- Think about training and transfer of skills. What skills can partners, collaborators and project participants gain from the process?
- Think about investing in long term tools and equipment that could be used beyond the current project.

A crucial consideration throughout the process of any project is gaining informed consent. Some of the things to think about to ensure that this process is ethical include:

- Being explicit about the fact that consent can be withdrawn without any penalties.
- Think about using someone that survivors/participants feel comfortable addressing to administer consent forms. This allows them to ask questions and object if needed.

On Informed and Active Consent




- Project participants need to know about all the processes involved in the project of storytelling. For example, it's very important to explain to participants about the editing process, if you are planning to do the editing and what that means and looks like. If the project will be distributed online, it's important to discuss what that means in relation to consent and the limitations they have in case they want to withdraw that consent

- They need to understand the risks, the benefits, the people and

organisations involved in the process. Some risks have been identified in preliminary research findings such as [Survivors' Experiences of Sharing Their Trafficking Stories Publicly](#). Provide resources for planning for and mitigating risks, such as those in the [Survivor Storytelling Workbook](#).

- They also need to understand how the stories will be used now and in the future.
- Ensure that participants understand if and how consent can be revoked.



After the active implementation phase of any storytelling project there are a further set of considerations:

- Think about the editing/curating process- question who gets to edit/curate what is important.
- Think about citation practices and who gives and gets credit.
- Think about how long the stories/images will be used for.
- Reconfirm consent if the stories/images will be used for a longer period than originally agreed, or if they will be reused for another purpose.
- Think about income/benefits in case what is produced has the ability to generate an income. Who gets paid? Who gets credit?

Here are some resources from AKN Partners on the process of co-creation with survivors and vulnerable groups

Further Reading- while some of these tools are designed for research, the lessons identified can be used for a creative project

- [Working with Partners in the Global South in the Arts and Humanities: Lessons from Network+](#) (AKN Report)
- [UKCDR Guidance on Safeguarding in International Development Research](#)

You can find more information on ethical storytelling, the importance of using stories, and policies on the use of images at the following links from other groups:

- [Resources from Africa No Filter](#)
- [Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche on the danger of a single story](#)
- [Tips for interviewing survivors from the Irina project](#)
- [Ethical storytelling guidance from Freedom United](#)
- [National Survivor Network's Storytelling Resources](#)