

Beyond Testimonies: Guidelines on ‘using’ Stories

February 2015

Beyond the Streets is a UK charity working to end sexual exploitation. Our vision is to see a world where people are free from exploitation, and where those involved in prostitution have the option to pursue genuine alternatives, free from constraints such as drug use, abusive relationships and poverty.



The organisations and institutions that work with the exploited and the vulnerable can often act as a window between ‘mainstream’ society and the people they work with.

Windows can often distort reality or create a different picture depending on what glass is put into the frame, how the structure of the window is created and what the window chooses to point towards. Similarly organisations can have a similar influence and consequently need to take the time to consider carefully the people they represent, their feelings and emotions about a situation, and the impact of how the organisation chooses to represent this group of people.

This guideline has been created with the intention that it would encourage those working with vulnerable and exploited people to think through how they ‘use’ people’s stories and how they communicate these stories to others in an ethical and sensitive manner, always portraying the people they work with in a dignified and respectful manner.

Sexual Exploitation

Prostitution in the UK manifests itself in a variety of on-street and off-street activities, and it is sex which many presume the sex industry to be about. Yet this global industry is more accurately understood as an abuse of power and/or vulnerability that preys on the young, vulnerable and marginalised – disproportionately this issue affects women¹ and girls (Scambler, 2007) but it also affects young boys², too. The complex causal factors that contribute to an individual becoming involved in the sex industry often contribute to the view that they have no option but to continue despite their desire to exit. In the UK it is estimated that around 75% of the people who are or have been involved in prostitution get involved before their 18th birthday (Benson & Matthews, 1995). There are no simple answers for this, yet research shows that there are some common causal factors. These include vulnerable situations such as severe adversity in the home environment and childhood sexual abuse, which results in young people running away from their home or statutory care settings.

The Impact of Testimonies

“We believe that media and communications has the ability to be used as a positive tool for advocacy [and raising awareness], but can also be used to inflict a “second victimization” upon victims or survivors by re-enhancing their feelings of violation, shame, disorientation, and loss of control...”

- Chab Dai, 2011

There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that a story has the power to mobilise people into action in a way that facts, figures, statistics and general concepts cannot. In addition, there is a clear difference between the impact of fiction and non-fiction in terms of the ethical, emotional and practical demands that these texts can and should make on their audiences (Bystrom, 2008). Consequently it is the case that life narratives have played a crucial role in aiding human rights work and raising awareness of injustices.

Research has shown that, contrary to popular belief, statistics don’t move people to action, however when an identifiable ‘victim’ is made into a cause, people are moved to compassionate and generous giving. A study was conducted by Deborah Small, George Lowenstein and Paul Slovic (2007) which examined the impact different types of appeals had on charitable giving to a hunger relief organisation. One appeal gave a personal story, another presented facts and statistics, and another gave both a personal story and presented facts and figures. The study found that people who were shown the first appeal gave twice as much as those who were shown the second appeal; whilst the third appeal only did slightly better than the second appeal. The findings of this research suggested that deliberative thinking can be undermined by systematic reactions.

For organisations, charities (etc.) who do human rights work, effective dissemination of information is an important tool in making an impact. Individuals may be inspired to donate time and money or to lobby against laws in their government; governments may be pressured into altering their behaviour; and companies may be forced to change their policies or other businesses that they work with in order to raise their status. Subsequently, this research has a clear impact in how charities, organisations, projects, churches and/or any other group of people ‘use’ the stories of people who have suffered any social injustice.

¹ In the UK, it is estimated that 85-90% involved in prostitution are female

² Evidence shows that violence against men and boys is nothing like on the same scale, severity, type or nature as the many forms of violence experienced by women and girls.

However there are many ethical considerations that need to be thought through before a person's life is made public, through whatever medium that might be. Otherwise the organisation working with the vulnerable and exploited might be guilty of exploiting the very people for whom they are trying to end exploitation. Therefore questions should be asked such as:

- Whose story is this?
- In what ways is the person whose story it is affected by making their life public?
- What are the ethical risks and obligations of doing so?
- How does an organisation avoid reducing subjects of these stories to nothing more than suffering 'victims'?
- How does an organisation avoid contributing to an audience's voyeuristic pleasure?
- What impact does the story have on the family and friends of the subject in the story?
- What impact does the story have on audiences making generalisations about others in the subject's community or others' experiences of exploitation?

This document hopes to help organisations to consider carefully the different impacts publicity can make both from the perspective of the individual and the organisation. The following points have been provided as guidelines to consider before publicising any story.

The Positive Aspects

It is important to remember that when stories are shared in the correct way they can have a positive effect and help individuals to build on their self-esteem and feel empowered. Telling your story can be healing and empowering, but often this happens in a one-on-one situation, small group setting or through writing your own story down. Telling one's story can also be a reminder of how far they have come and of a life they do not want to return to. It is vital that people are given the opportunity to tell their stories if they would like to, as it can give them the opportunity to validate their experiences and may also encourage and offer hope to others in similar circumstances. It can also allow the individual to feel like they are making a difference in something that is particularly personal to them. However, all of this should be balanced with the potential negative effects and the possible implications for the people concerned.

The Impact of using stories/photography/videography on the person

Telling one's story, through whatever medium that might be, can be both a positive and/or a negative experience. Therefore, if an individual requests to tell their story or is encouraged/asked to tell their story, they should first be made aware of all the potential implications of doing so.

The person telling their story should be encouraged to think about:

- How the story might affect the ones they love (e.g. family and friends) and subsequently have the potential to affect those relationships.
- Whether telling their story inhibits the person to move beyond that stage in their life, and possibly leads that person back into her/his old way of life.

- How the person will feel if telling their story changes the way people view them and they become known for the story rather than who they are/their personality:
 - o E.g. as a 'prostitute' who is changed
 - o E.g. labelled as a 'former...'
 - o This may bring admiration which can be overwhelming and can make someone feel like they have to live up to certain expectations; it could also bring some negative reactions and rejection of the individual in some parts of society.
- Whether the person would like to be known for this story later on in life once that person is in a completely different stage of life – e.g. would they like their children/grandchildren to find out about it.
- Whether or not they feel a sense of duty to either an organisation that has worked with them or to pastors/churches – as they feel like they 'owe' it to the organisation/church/God.
 - o This may include a pressure 'to go public' which the subject has bestowed upon themselves.
- The effects on the individual of 'reliving' their experiences through telling their story – and whether this could create re-traumatisation.
- How the story/image will be passed on to others – who will hear the story, who will tell the story, and how their story will be subtly changed from person to person. This subsequently brings up the question of who then owns the story?
- The fact that once a story is 'out' (particularly through the internet) it is very difficult/almost impossible to get it back.
- Whether or not telling their story could compromise their safety in any way.
- How they would feel if their asset became their story (instead of their body?) – and they were 'used' for that instead of cared for and given the right support.
- Whether or not they feel free to present their story truthfully disregarding other people's agendas. For instance many people might be looking for a story with a 'happy ever after' ending; the person should not feel pressurised to present a false truth to satisfy listeners or organisations.
- How they would like to express their story (if they would like to) - in which medium? With what levels of confidentiality/anonymity? For what purpose? It is important to remember that once a story goes on to the internet there is little control over what others post online and how it can be reposted. Similarly it is unlikely to be able to be removed.
- Whether or not the person telling their story has someone who they can help them process the implications of doing so (e.g. a third party with no agenda). This person could also help them to think through what to share and when to do so.
- Whether or not they feel further exploited or further empowered.
- How long it has been since their involvement in prostitution or experience of exploitation, and whether this has been a significant enough period for them personally to start re-telling their story.

The Impact of storytelling and imagery on communities

Although special consideration should be taken to consider the individual when publicising someone's life, thought should also be given to how this story reveals a bigger picture about a particular community, and how stigma and stereotypes about particular groups of people might increase through the use of stories. It is important to be aware of creating generalisations about exploitation,

vulnerability, power dynamics and even a glamorised lifestyle; also to be aware of the possible negative ripple effects that a story can have.

Here are some guidelines to consider before representing a group/community:

- Truthfully represent any image or depicted situation both in its immediate and in its wider context so as to improve public understanding of the realities and complexities of development.
- Avoid images and messages that potentially stereotype, sensationalise or discriminate against people, situations or places.
- Avoid using labels, sensational language and images, and avoid language that exaggerates for effect – remember that although you can speak for yourself, you are still sometimes representing other people (e.g. people who are homeless, people who are involved in prostitution and people who are dependent on drugs). The image you put across could have an effect on public attitudes towards a particular group.
- Organisations - don't choose to only present the stories about extreme circumstances, but present all different types of stories.
- Present stories truthfully, taking into account that one person's experience might be completely different to another's.
- Ensure that no information is given away which could put any other person at risk or allows identification of another person's identity.

Organisations/Projects/Churches

Organisations who work with vulnerable people should ALWAYS have a person-centred approach, where the people they work with are their greatest priority. Be sensitive!

Attention must be given to potential power dynamics that might exist between organisations and individuals, particularly when those individuals may have come out of an exploited, power-based industry, such as the sex industry. Organisations should be aware that a woman who has come out of an exploitative situation may appear to want to tell their story (or in fact do anything that the organisation requests) because they are still in a mindset of performing to please others. One thing to keep in mind is that the length of time since a person has been involved in prostitution or experienced exploitation will be a significant influence in whether someone is able to tell their story in a safe environment with minimal harm. However, there is also a danger that an assumption could be made that simply because a significant period of time has passed, the person who has previously been exploited is in a good place and doesn't need the safe support. Organisations should be wary of this.

All organisations should have a responsibility to:

- Always treat all people who have been exploited with dignity and respect.
- Ensure that all 'potential' storytellers, through whatever medium, understand **in their own language** what they are 'signing' up to when giving consent. All risks should be clearly outlined for each person.
- Consent should be time bound. It should be ensured that the same images and stories are not continually circulated as the client's situation may change over time, and it may become highly inappropriate and unethical to continue using the same images/stories.
- Subjects should always have the option, and be aware of the option, to withdraw permission, even after a story or photo is published.

- Organisations should offer an opportunity for support after an interview, and subjects should receive information and details of whom they could consult or complain to should they have concerns during or on completion of an interview.
- It is recommended that only those who have come out of their exploitation and are in a safe, healthy place should share their stories or be photographed by an organisation.
- Ensure those whose situation is being represented have the opportunity to communicate their stories themselves if they desire to.
- Ensure that all information released by the organisation is accurate. Sometimes this may require double-checking. When you first talk to a person who may be processing their exploitation, they may be confused or distracted.
- Organisations should use their discretion (and err on the side of caution) when deciding whether a person should be telling their story – as the subject themselves might not have developed healthy boundaries and may not know what is appropriate/enough to share. However, especially with adults, it is ultimately their decision.
- Explain usage of story/photo to the subject. At the bare minimum the subject should be made aware that their story and/or photo will be known and seen by others outside their community, and at times those inside their community as well.
- Organisations need to be intentional about creating policies that protect the people that they work with – this also enables an organisation to refer easily to their policies when outsiders request permission to publicise the organisation or people in it.
- Organisations should consider having accountable partner organisations that have experience in the area they work in to help process their decisions around publicising other's stories.

Photography/Videography

Using photography in communication can portray a different, equally important message as an audible or written story. Photography has the ability to impact both the subject and the viewer and should therefore depict a story of hope, strength, and resilience. All communications should respect human dignity and not portray people as helpless victims. Imagery that fully protects the subject's identity can be as powerful and convincing as any other approach to documenting abuse.

Below are some guidelines that should be taken into consideration:

- Be intentional that your photos/videos are not taken from a high angle; this can place the viewer in a position of power above the subject and invite the viewer to look down in pity and want to help. Photos should highlight the strength and resilience of the person being photographed; this can be by taking a photo at eye level or a lower angle.
- Identity should never be discernible in images if informed consent has not been given. Blurring and blacking out of eyes rarely communicates hope and dignity and is often not enough to conceal a person's identity. There are creative effects that can be used to cover faces such as lens flare, shadows, blur and overpowering light.
- In videos it is important to ensure that a voice is also obscured as a person may become identifiable through his/her voice.
- Be creative and take photographs of the back of the person's head and/or other body parts (i.e. hands, feet, etc) provided that they do not include identifying features (i.e. distinctive scarring, tattoos).
- Do not take images of a sexualised nature.

- Ensure that nothing in the photograph (i.e. background) or its caption may lead to the identification, recognition or tracing of the person.
- Avoid sensationalising an issue in a way that would provide an effect of shock, fear or guilt in the viewer. It is important to treat the person pictured with sensitivity and respect.
- Instead of choosing images that focus on the darkness of an issue, choose images that highlight the positive and show resilience in the face of adversity. These images celebrate the courage and strength of people who have been exploited.
- Visiting groups should not be allowed to photograph any subjects; however they could be invited to photograph the premises of an organisation.
- Any person behind a camera should be conscious of whether the person being photographed/videoed has previously been exploited through pornography, and therefore may experience trauma when seeing a camera again.

Christian Principle

If you are working with an organisation with a Christian ethos it is important to have a God-centred attitude to the work that you are doing. Jesus chose to treat the people he encountered, no matter what their status, with respect, dignity and love – never choosing to promote himself through the works that he did. His person-centred approach transformed the lives of those around Him and he had no ulterior agenda other than to love those who were set before him and to reveal His Father's love and grace.

It is good to remember that the people before you are exactly that: *people*. They are not a task, an output, a fundraising opportunity or a trophy (amongst other things), but they are a person, made in the image of God. If we treat people as a 'fundraising tool', particularly if their story is a 'good testimony' we run the risk of adding 'spiritual abuse' to the list of abuses that those we support face.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the practitioners, and everyone who has been directly affected by this issue, in the time and expertise they offered to create this document.

This document was written as a result of a conversation with many practitioners with years of experience. We have sought to capture learning and present it in a way that can shape conversation for the future. Please feel free to continue this conversation, but could we ask that you reference the source, thereby recognising the hard work of those who have so generously shared their learning.

Appendix:

The following websites offer ways of sharing stories through a participatory approach which emphasises the agency/power to change of the individual:

Silence Speaks

www.silencespeaks.org

Since 1999, Silence Speaks has been committed to fostering individual and collective healing and justice by nurturing the production of personal media narratives and bringing these narratives into carefully-considered public spheres.... We believe that with skilful presentation and strategic thinking about audience, first-person voices can bring attention to the systematic causes of chronic poverty, ill-health, and violence in ways that demand accountability and prompt change at community, institutional, and government levels... Close collaboration with partner organisations results in the design of projects that attend to emotions and offer a safe and meaningful workshop experience... The guiding vision is to listen deeply and challenge legacies of voyeurism and media exploitation by ensuring that storytellers, not producers, have primary control over what is shared and how events and people are portrayed. Sharing stories in a group can be transformative... if done with appropriate preparation and follow up support, [it] can have a profound impact on a person's ability to thrive, sustain mutually healthy and loving relationships, and participate in civil society in meaningful ways.

Living Lens

<http://www.livinglens.co.uk/>

Living Lens is a creative tool used with groups in the UK and other countries for over 8 years. The foundation of what is brought to every project is expressed in the values:

- Contribution: knowing everyone can contribute
- Adventure: exploring new opportunities
- Passion: igniting the creative drive
- Durability: what matters endures

Video is used as a tool to mobilise groups and individuals to explore the issues that bring them together... Using video as a tool to build communication, we found participants were able to go beyond the 'them' and 'us' mentality that had them stuck in the problem.

Gathered Voices

<http://www.gatheredvoices.com/>

Gathered Voices is a website dedicated to inviting people on the margins of society to speak, through poetry, testimonies, stories and art. This site has been designed to inform and entertain, to challenge stereotypes, and raise awareness. By giving a forum to experiences and feelings which are often ignored, it hopes to increase awareness of the real issues facing marginalised people, and support organisations working with them to find freedom and hope.

Media Consent Form

I, _____ [Client Name] _____ understand that my story, photo and voice is my own and hereby grant my permission to [media outlet] to

(check all that apply):

- Interview me
- Take pictures of my image
- Tape record my voice
- Videotape me

I understand that the information I provide may be edited and shared both immediately and in the future with [media outlet]'s audiences on websites, in videos, and on other public online forums (email, social networking sites, newsletters, etc.).

I consent under the condition that the following requirements are met

(check one):

- My image is used without being obscured.
- My image is obscured so as not to reveal my identity.

(check one):

- My real name is used.
- A pseudonym is used to protect my identity.

(check one):

- My voice is used without masking.
- My voice is masked to protect my identity.

I understand that media shared on the internet is subject to sharing and is accessible globally (in Cambodia, USA, etc.). I have the right to retract my consent after the production of the video, website, etc.

My interview, picture, voice, or video can be used by [media outlet] for

(check one):

- One time only for ___[specify usage] _____.
- Up to one month.
- Up to one year.
- Other: _____

Other conditions:

(Client Signature)

(Date)

(Guardian Witness)

(Media Outlet Signature)

(Date)

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