

JULIANA DOGBADZI

“THERE ARE MORE WOMEN WHO REMAIN IN THE SHRINE WHO NEED HELP. NO ONE IS GOING TO REPRESENT THEM BETTER THAN SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN IN THE SHRINE AND WHO HAS GONE THROUGH THE PAIN... AGAINST ALL ODDS, I DECIDED TO TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ADDRESSING THE ISSUE AND HAVE BEEN DOING SO EVER SINCE.”



Juliana Dogbadzi, ©2000 Eddie Adams

Enslaved in a shrine in her native Ghana as a young child under a custom known as *Trokosi*, Juliana Dogbadzi was forced to work without pay, food or clothing, and to perform sexual services for the holy man. She was able to escape seventeen years later, after several failed attempts, at the age of twenty-three. *Trokosi* comes from an Ewe word meaning “slave of the gods,” and is understood as a religious and cultural practice in which young girls, mostly virgins, are sent into lifelong servitude to atone for the alleged crimes of their relatives. In 1997, it was estimated that approximately five thousand young girls and women were being kept in 345 shrines in the southeastern part of Ghana. Through Juliana Dogbadzi’s daring escape and her subsequent efforts to denounce the system, the *Trokosi* practice was banned in Ghana; however, law enforcement against *Trokosi* is still lax. Dogbadzi continues to speak out against *Trokosi*, traveling the country, meeting with slaves, and trying to win their emancipation; increasingly, she is not alone in her courageous stance.

I have never been in a classroom. I have never been to school. When I was seven years old, my parents took me from our home and sent me to a shrine where I was a slave to a fetish priest for seventeen years. My grandfather, they said, had stolen two dollars. When he was suspected of the crime and asked to return the money, he defended his innocence. The woman who had accused him of the crime went to the shrine and cursed my grandfather's family, at which point members of my family began to die. In order to stop the deaths, a soothsayer told us that my grandfather would have to report to the Trokosi shrine. The priest told my family that it must bring a young girl to the shrine to appease the gods. A sister was sent to the shrine at Kebenu some six hundred miles away, but she died a few years later. Since I had been born just after my grandfather's death, I became her replacement.

I lived and worked in the priest's fields and kept the compound clean. While doing so, I was raped repeatedly by the priest on torn mats on the cold floor of windowless huts. The other female slaves and I received neither food nor medical care. We had to find time after working on the priest's farm to burn charcoal or to sell firewood in the nearest town in order to make enough money to buy food. There were times we lived on raw peppers or palm kernel nuts to stay alive.

Because I was just a kid, I didn't know what to do. There was an elder woman who was a slave and took care of me. She couldn't help me much because she had so many kids as a consequence of being raped by the priest. She said, "Look, little girl, take care of yourself or you will die." There used to be a hundred women slaves in my shrine, but the priest sent about ninety of them to work on his farms in other villages. Collectively, they had about sixty-five children and would have to work to look after the children.

Twelve of us, four women and eight children, lived in a one-room, thatched-roof house. It was built of mud and lacked both windows and doors. The rain got in. The snakes got in. The room was twenty feet long and twelve feet wide. The ceiling was low, just shy of our heads, and we all slept together on a mat on the floor. This is not everything that I can remember, but saying it brings back pains of old and it's difficult to go back through all those experiences.

You see, in the shrine you have no right to put on shoes or a hat to protect yourself against the hot sun. If it is raining or cold, you have only a small piece of cloth around yourself. A typical day in the shrine was as follows: you wake up at five o'clock in the morning, go to the stream about five kilometers away to get water for the compound, sweep, prepare meals for the priest (not eating any yourself), go to the farm, work until six o'clock, and return to sleep without food or to scrounge for leftovers. At night, the priest would call one of us to his room and would rape us. I was about twelve when I was first raped.

There was favoritism even in slavery. The priest liked girls who would readily give in to his sexual demands and hated those who would always put up a fight. Consequently, these girls were beaten.

The ones he liked always said they were being wise because they wanted to avoid being beaten, while some of us maintained that they were foolish and were enjoying sex with a man they didn't love. When I saw people who came to the village to buy food wearing nice dresses, I started to think that I had to do something for myself. I had to get freedom.

I had to do something that would change my life. I escaped several times. The first time I escaped, I went to my parents. I told them I was suffering in the shrine, but they were scared to keep me. They said that if they did, the gods would strike them dead. They brought me back to the priest to suffer the same pain again. I thought, no. This is not going to happen again. I had to find a way to free myself and free the other women, too.

The second time I escaped, I went to a nearby village. A young man fed me and took me to himself. He took advantage of me and made me pregnant. When the priest found out, he sent young men around the village to get me. They beat me endlessly and I had lots of cuts on my body. I collapsed and nearly died. The child's father had wanted to take care of us, but the priest threatened him with death. The young man who was taking care of me was asked to pay some bottles of hard liquor and a fowl and warned to stay away from me or die. I haven't seen him since and he hasn't seen our child.

The third time I escaped, I resolved that I would never again go back to the shrine. By this time, I was three months pregnant as a result of another rape that I had suffered from the priest. I was not feeling very well. For a number of days I had starved. I was pregnant and needed to get some food. Otherwise, I was going to die. I decided to go to a nearby farm owned by the priest to get an ear of corn from the crop which the other slaves in the shrine and I had planted. I was caught stealing the corn and the priest ordered the young men around the village to beat me until I fell unconscious. When I came to, I saw all the bruises and wounds on my body and nearly lost the baby I was carrying. I decided I had to leave or I would be killed. But it was not to be. I was scared and I went back to the shrine again. Yet, that was the turning point. I was about seventeen or eighteen at the time and resolved that I was going to do something to help other people in the shrine.

One day, a man representing a nonprofit organization called International Needs—Ghana came to the shrine to talk to the priest. This was my chance. I don't know where my sudden confidence came from, but all my fear had disappeared. I was no longer afraid of death and was prepared to die for others. Thank God I had that feeling! I did not escape immediately because I was very weak, my pregnancy was well advanced and I could not walk a long distance. Luckily, I had the baby a few weeks later. With the baby strapped to my back and the first child, Wonder, in my hands, I escaped through the bush to the major street where I was given a lift to Adidome and to the site of International Needs—Ghana.

The members of the organization taught me a lot of skills and kept me away from the priest. They trained me in bread baking and other vocations. Nonetheless, I thought, "There are more women who remain in the shrine who need help. No one is going

to represent them better than someone who has been in the shrine and who has gone through the pain, someone who can tell the world what happens in the shrine. If no one stops this practice, we will all have to die in pain.” Against all odds, I decided to take the responsibility of addressing the issue and have been doing so ever since. I went to the shrines and spoke to the inmates. I told them that they needed to gather courage like I had and to get out.

The shrine claims powers it does not have in order to instill fear in the slaves and to stop them from escaping. The practice is a deliberate attempt by men to subjugate women. A man commits a crime and a woman has to pay for it. That is unacceptable. Likewise, the shrine is a crime against children. The child of a slave shares his mother’s plight. When the mother has food to eat, the child eats. If she has no food, the child will starve. If she has clothing, the child will likewise have some. If not, that is it. If she goes to the farm, the child goes along. There are thousands of women Trokosi slaves with children who need to be helped. Those who have been liberated also require help in order to recover from the suffering endured in the shrines.

Unlike most of the other girls and women, I got over the fear instilled by the Trokosi system. This was my weapon. Now that I have escaped, I help to diminish the women’s fears by telling them my story. I tell them what I am presently doing, that I am still alive, not dead, as they have been made to believe. I try to help the priests to understand the pain that the women have endured. Some do not allow me to enter their shrines any longer. When I am in the city, I educate people about life in the shrines and advocate for an end to the practice.

What I do is dangerous, but I am prepared to die for a good cause. People send threats by letter and others confront me openly. Thank God that those I work with are very strong and give me encouragement. At the moment, eight girls have joined me in my work with the organization. My next step to disbanding Trokosi is to ensure enforcement of the law and to get allied organizations in the Republics of Togo and Benin to stop this practice in their respective countries.

I do believe I have a calling because it is strange to be alive and sane and working after going through what I went through. The help that I have received from International Needs and my own confidence have made all the difference. I have totally forgiven my parents because I know that what they did to me was done through ignorance and fear. I don’t want them to feel guilty so I avoid telling them about my experiences. I don’t, however, see them often. I am glad to say that I am now happily married and have just had my first planned baby with the man I love. My life today is like the life of any other young woman.

DEFENDER AGAINST MODERN SLAVERY AND TRAFFICKING

JULIANA DOGBADZI

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 9–12
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE: MODERN
SLAVERY/TRAFFICKING

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

- **Article 1:** Right to Equality
- **Article 2:** Freedom from Discrimination
- **Article 3:** Right to Life, Liberty, and Personal Security
- **Article 4:** Freedom from Slavery
- **Article 5:** Freedom from Torture and Degrading Treatment
- **Article 6:** Right to Recognition as a Person before the Law
- **Article 7:** Right to Equality before the Law

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- If slavery is illegal, why does it exist throughout the world today?
- For what reasons do governments turn a blind eye to human trafficking and slavery?
- How can effective change occur?

TIME REQUIREMENT: 40 minutes

OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will be able to:

- Recognize the issue of human trafficking and its relationship to modern slavery.
- Listen to an excerpt about Juliana Dogbadzi and discuss the source of her enslavement, the results of her enslavement, and the ultimate outcome of her situation.
- Reflect on the concept of paying for the wrongs of another person in order to recognize the ways in which the issue relates to their own lives.
- Brainstorm ideas for taking action against these violations of human rights.
- Write for personal reflection to assess their understanding of the issue.
- Propose and implement an action.

COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELALITERACY.W.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9

VOCABULARY:

- **Trafficking**
- **Trokosi**
- **Shrine**
- **Fetish Priest**
- **Non-governmental organizations**
- **Advocate**
- **Trafficking Victims' Protection Act**

CONCEPTS:

- **Human trafficking**
- **Sex slavery**
- **Fear**
- **Subjugation**
- **Advocacy**

TEACHER TIP: Both vocabulary and concepts must be taught prior to the lesson.

TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:

- Internet access with YouTube available
- Projector from the computer to screen or interactive whiteboard
- Student Response System, if possible

MATERIALS:

- Index cards
- Glossary of relevant terms
<http://www.wgbh.org/articles/Human-Trafficking-Glossary-of-Terms-289>
- YouTube video on modern slavery:
<http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HRwaM9ICrM>
- Dogbadzi bio, interview and discussion questions:
www.rfkhumanrights.org / click on **Speak Truth to Power** / click on **“Defenders”** tab

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

ANTICIPATORY SET:

- Ask students to consider the following questions and poll their answers:
 - Is slavery legal anywhere in the world today?
 - If slavery exists today, how many slaves do you think there are?
 - Do you think the number is greater than, less than, or equal to the number of slaves in America at the time of emancipation? Are there slaves in America today?
- Show the YouTube video on modern slavery and refer to previous questions for a class discussion after viewing:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jv1H_fAoOG4

TEACHER TIP: Post the three questions on the board and ask students to consider them prior to the bell. (Bell Ringer Activity)

ACTIVITY 1:

- Provide a brief background about Juliana Dogbadzi. Read the excerpt from *Speak Truth To Power* to the class, having the students take notes on the handout with questions for discussion: www.rfkhumanrights.org
- Distribute the questions for discussion.
- After reading is completed, provide time for discussion in response to the questions.

ACTIVITY 2:

- Brainstorm ways in which students can take action and become defenders.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, many other international documents—also called treaties, covenants, resolutions, or conventions—have been drafted to develop these rights further. Countries commit to protect the rights recognized in these treaties by ‘ratifying’ them and sometimes a specific institution is created within the UN to monitor their compliance.

Here are examples of relevant international documents:

CONVENTION AGAINST TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT

- **Article 1:** definition of torture and CIDT
- **Article 4:** obligation to penalize acts of torture

INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

For more information, visit the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ website: www.ohchr.org

BECOME A DEFENDER

Students will select one of the following projects to advocate for the end of slavery:

- Research what the United States Department of State is doing currently to stop human trafficking and write an article for the school newsletter or the local newspaper about the problem and ways in which it can be addressed.
- Research the efforts being made by a specific NGO to stop trafficking and write an article about its efforts for the school newsletter.
- Make a video highlighting the injustices of human trafficking that can be shown to the student body.
- Create and publish a glog that provides text, audio, and media to expose the issue and raise awareness (www.edu.glogster.com). Teachers can get free accounts for their students by registering at the glogster site.

- Write a letter to your senator or representative expressing your concerns about the lack of enforcement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and request his or her intervention.
- Contact an NGO that fights against trafficking and arrange for a speaker to come to your class, school, or a community event in order to raise awareness.
- Start a fund to contribute to an NGO that works toward ending human trafficking.

TEACHER TIP: The lesson can be easily expanded into more than one 40-minute period. If discussion time is needed, expansion is highly recommended. Additional resources will enable teachers and students to learn more about the extensive problem of human trafficking and slavery in today's world, either together or independently.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Freetheslaves.net:

<http://www.freetheslaves.net/>

Site includes a variety of information about human trafficking and finding a solution to end slavery in our time.

Trafficking in Persons Report 2010:

<http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2010/index.htm>

Excellent source of current information about human trafficking, including: an interactive map; narratives on each country discussing the level of their involvement, their efforts to eradicate the problem, and the recommendations to increase effectiveness of efforts; victims' stories; and many other resources

Polaris Project Action Center

<http://www.polarisproject.org/>

Another rich source from an NGO. Included are survivor stories, current actions, ways to get involved, etc.

PBS Frontline:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/slaves/etc/stats.html>

A resource with valuable links to NGOs and many articles

PBS Frontline Modern Slavery Documentary:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/slaves/>

Includes excerpt of Frontline's documentary about sex slavery and other related resources.

PBS Frontline Map:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/slaves/map/indexflash.html>

This link takes you to a PBS –Frontline interactive map that accompanies the story on sex slaves.

The Trokosi in Ghana

<http://www.sos-sexisme.org/English/slavery.htm>

Article on the Trokosi in Ghana

International Needs Transforming the Lives of Women in Ghana:

<https://www.internationalneeds.org.au/Ghana>

Extensive information on the Trokosi in Ghana and the work this NGO is doing to end the practice.

Ghana's Slaves to the Gods:

<http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1515&context=hrbrief>

Excellent article about the practice in Ghana and Juliana Dogbadzi

21st Century Slaves:

http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0309/feature1/National_Geographic—info_and_multiple_links_to_resources