



## Survivor Stories

### **Setsofia Dowokpor: Illness Forced His Mother to Sell Him into Slavery**

Story by Anna Bengel & Theodore Atsu Ameme | Photos by Emily Teague

His bedridden mother sold him to traffickers in a desperate bid for money. Setsofia was trapped in slavery for five years. His sick mother died. But community outreach efforts won him his freedom.

#### **Tearing Families Apart**

When Setsofia was young, his mother fell ill and was bedridden. His father, the family provider, had died years before. He was forced to abandon his education when he was only 8 years old.

Impoverished and faced with impossible challenges, Setsofia's sick mother arranged for him to be trafficked to a fishing village along Lake Volta. It was a desperate bid to get money for treatment for her protracted illness.

Poverty and illness often force vulnerable families to sell their children into slavery. Ignorance of laws outlawing slavery, as well as laws to punish, prosecute, and imprison perpetrators of child trafficking, exacerbates the crisis. Many people do not even know slavery is a crime.



Tricked by a trafficker, Setsofia left his boyhood home with expectations of better treatment and more opportunities. He was falsely promised education and assured he would work only part time.

But Setsofia was forced to work day and night on dangerous, deadly fishing boats, with very little food or rest. He was trapped, under threat of violence, unable to walk away. "I lived and worked against my will for five years, under my master," he says. "I wake up at dawn and work on the Volta Lake until dusk."



Many children are enslaved on Lake Volta, the biggest reservoir in the world. In this huge expanse of water, storms can easily capsize small vessels and kill all those aboard. Many children are never seen again.

Setsofia recalls how the heavy nets often get knotted at the bottom of the lake. Diving down to untangle them is the most dangerous task child slaves are forced to do. Many never resurface. "I don't like going in to remove it," Setsofia says. "It is dangerous, and people normally get injured."

Sadly, Setsofia's mother died, leaving him an orphan. "If she knew she would not survive even after selling me off," he says, "I think she would not have sold me out to be forced to work against my will in exchange of the money she received in advance."

### **Freeing Setsofia**

Child slaves are often abused, neglected and starved. Maltreatment is common. So are fear and hopelessness.

FTS and our partners work on the front lines to educate communities on child trafficking, child protection violations, and the slavery that devastates Ghanaian families. Many communities need

help building resistance to traffickers. Our Community-based Model for Freedom supports grassroots efforts to empower and transform communities. We are committed to freeing slaves, telling survivor stories, and creating sustainable systems of freedom.



International Needs Ghana, an FTS partner, visited Setsofia’s childhood village to talk about the need to keep children away from hazardous work and to urge slave owners to release their trafficked children. As a result of this outreach and pressure, his slave holder freed Setsofia August 12, 2016.

### **‘Dawn of a New Day’**

After his release, Setsofia received psychological counseling and reintegration support. He was enrolled in school and given books, pencils, erasers, rulers, crayons and other supplies. He was registered in the Ghanaian health system to receive access to health care.

“It is an obvious dawn of a new day,” Setsofia says, “full of better opportunities and expectations in my life.” Although his parents are both gone, Setsofia is happy living under the care of his only surviving grandmother. “I am grateful to International Needs for all their efforts to eliminate child trafficking and combat other forms of slavery,” he says.

Today Setsofia hopes to become a teacher.



### **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).



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