

Human Rights Conversations Across Generations

Ruth Jambani Kimani episode

Transcript of edited conversation

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MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:04

Hi, welcome to our podcast, Human Rights, Conversations Across Generations. I'm Meredith Lockwood, founder of Lockwood Creative, a purpose-driven creative agency. And I'm here with my dad.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:16

And I'm Professor Bert Lockwood, the director of the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights at the University of Cincinnati College of Law.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:26

Together, we are your father-daughter co-hosts.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:29

For over 50 years, I've had a front-row seat to the evolution of international human rights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:35

And now, we're sharing that expertise with you by connecting to the powerful stories and insights of human rights voices from around the world.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:43

We bridge the past and the present, making complex human rights issues more approachable and understandable.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:50

So, pull up a chair and join our table as we speak with Nobel Peace Prize recipients, political leaders and the world's leading human rights scholars and activists.

BERT LOCKWOOD

Today, we are honored to welcome Ruth Kamani, Head of Programs for Africa at the Freedom Fund. Ruth leads the Freedom Fund's work across Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, partnering with frontline organizations and communities to combat modern slavery through locally-led, trust-based solutions. Together, these programs have invested more than \$26 million

in grassroots partners and directly impacted more than 223,000 people across the region. With more than two decades of experience in human rights and international development, Ruth has helped more than 200 organizations across Africa access the financial and technical support needed to strengthen their communities. She is a passionate advocate for shifting power to local partners, believing that those closest to a problem should be the ones leading

the solutions. In today's conversation, we explore the hidden reality of child domestic work, one of the most overlooked forms of modern slavery, and discuss how community-led partnerships, survivor leadership, and long-term investment are helping create lasting change across Africa. Ruth, it's a pleasure to have you with us today.

RUTH KIMANI 2:34

Thank you so much, Meredith and Bert for having me.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:36

We are so excited to have you here and it's

to get us started. We would really love to learn more about you. Could you share with our listeners a bit about yourself, perhaps where you grew

RUTH KIMANI 2:51

my name is Kimani, but I have a native name I'm Jambí, which in my culture means, a woman of, wisdom. I'm a Kenyan woman, a mother and a proud daughter of this continent, Africa. A mother and a proud daughter of this continent in Africa. I was born and bred in Limuru. It's a, it's in the central region of Kenya, a place well known for the beautiful tea plantations. Um, and it's famously known for cold weather. Uh, It's pretty cool. It's a highland region. growing up, my mom was convinced that I would end up being a teacher. Uh, so during my playtime, she would always find me arranging maize cobs, you know, after a harvest, uh, I would have them in perfect lines, uh, given either a lecture or even find me in the shed where, because we had animals. So, um, either talking to the sheep and goats.

I guess that is where maybe the seeds of, uh, uh, you know, uh, planted of being an educator and a mobilizer of community. so I'm also raised by very staunch Christian, uh, parents, w meant that most of the time I would spend in church. and in school, I don't think there's any single story in the Bible that we haven't enacted as a family. I have one time been the good Samaritan woman. My sister has been the Mary, mother of Jesus. My brother has been Joseph. We have, we enacted most of the stories in the Bible.

so, uh, you know, collective care, building a strong community, you and family. Uh, I I was, uh, through that kind of socialization, then when I joined the university, um, because I have a background in sociology and economics, I, I think that foundation was also put in place because I joined a peer education where again, there I found myself sensitizing my fellow students and peers on sexual reproductive health and HIV. During a that the rates of infection was very high. so I have had interest in, you know, growing up in spaces that have sort of like, shaped me to now the work that I do currently. that have heard the advice that I do. So yeah. So basically that's my brief background of who Ruth is. Have

BERT LOCKWOOD 5:18

Fascinating. one thing that seemed to particularly challenging, about your work was that, the labor part of is often taking place within a family.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 5:31

Yeah. Behind closed doors.

BERT LOCKWOOD 5:34

I just sort sense a, uh, a tension there i, in terms of being able get inside the family. And, I think there was that was mentioned, she was working for an aunt and like 70 hours a week or so. I mean, there wasn't any way that she could go to school or effectively go to school and do the homework because she she was so tired, um, just with the demands that were being put on, but they were demands being put on by one of her relatives, uh, basically. And, the place she that, that has to be particularly challenging aspect of your work, which it seems to me is different than. Many human rights, uh, kind of organizations.

RUTH KIMANI 6:20

Indeed. You're right. Yeah. It's, challenging and complex itself. And it's because, you know, with child domestic work, even when you look at this, the three countries where we work in, it shows up differently, but you find that, uh, there are commonalities in terms of the push factors. Um, so it is, that is family desperation. It you know, a young girl has been promised, good sort of future, you know, setting that, than where she is right now. and then also, you know, it shows up like that in terms of, sometimes it's families sending their children away so that, that can be, as a source of alternative livelihood to be able to support either siblings or to support. Things that are happening at home, one of the things that I have found, it's sort of like reminding ourselves where, the place of this child in, in the community. Um, when I, when I was thinking about this podcast, and, and, and even conversations that I've had when I to partners is, is when I was growing up, I belonged to everyone. you, you see, like, if. I am outside. I talked about upbringing. a people would know that I belong to this, church elder. My father was a church elder. So, everyone around me in my neighbourhood knew that this Ruth is a daughter of Elder Simon. So, if I'm seen at a corner somewhere with a, with a boy, you know, the adult, the adult who has found me with a boy, will actually, you know, you know, pinch you, take you as in

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 8:06

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RUTH KIMANI 8:07

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MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 8:08

You had eyes on you all the time.

RUTH KIMANI 8:12

And then, yo know, A are not my mother, are not my aunt, are not Burry's, just as realize that what you're doing is alright. So, you should be. so, any child belongs to the community. That was how it was. And I couldn't even go back home and say that, that happened. Because I

knew when I go back home, because I knew when I go back home, I'd still be beaten or I'd still be punished in a way. Um, but I got my lesson, you know, that adults, took upon themselves to make sure that he or she is teaching me something. So, I think we have, owing to a point where we become so individualized such that those networks have loosened up. And so even with the conversations we have in our programming, in our, in our, um, in -- as you're thinking of the both different intervention is to go back to those structures, those community structures that were protected, that they existed, that you cared about your neighbor. you know, and, and those are the community structures that our partners are engaging in, you know, the community watch the job, the neighborhood watch dogs because they are there, they exist. They are those that usually are formed to work on, know, supporting families that are not doing well. And so they come together and collect a few shillings to be able to educate a child, or to, you know, those community structures exist.

And so what we are doing with our intervention is, is going back to those community structures and using them as protective guards. Such that when we know that there was a child who was taken, has gone to Nairobi, if it's in one of the rural areas, has come to Nairobi, there is an elder or, or a, or a church elder or a community or a chief, who goes back to that home to find out, are you checking on your child who is in Nairobi, what is that child doing, you know.

So those, t are the elements that we are in building our programs so that we are able to monitor, to be able to monitor households, to be able to, repor on incidences that, you know, uh, if there's an exploitation that has, has, has happened, that there's, there's, there's sanctions within the same, same communities actually put, to, to sort of punish the perpetrators. So there are places where that is working, with having community watchdogs and mostly you find either in rural areas and in the urban areas, maybe in those informal settlements, in the slums or, where such structures, uh, you know, community structures are working to be able to monitor, the situation because, as you rightly put, when it comes to child domestic work, it's not like the child labor where you, you see it in a, farm. So, uh, uh, th is where a labor inspector can quickly go and be able to identify, uh, but a labor inspector cannot come knocking at your door, uh, to check, uh, whether you have a house help who is a child. but a chief, uh, an elder, church elder, can actually...

uh, can actually, uh,

...house and be able to, see or be able to pick up markers that would be able to question, I think, I think there are children here who are being exploited. And, and so those are the things that we integr in our, you know, our programming, as monitors.

BERT LOCKWOOD 11:26

well, I had a, um, one of my human rights Josiah Koba, who was a, uh, Ghanian, uh, w an article in the human rights quarterly that I edit And, part of it was on this notion that the African concept of family was, , Different than in the West here, that there were many more adults involved, they may have been your uncles and aunts, but they were of equal status with

your actual parents. I mean, that, uh, that it was sort of a community, uh, approach to child raising, if you, if you will. But it sounds to me like that's something similar to, to what you're describing.

RUTH KIMANI 12:15

It's going back to those roots. Yes. Because you'll find that, um, it was slowly like, in some places it's slowly. And I think it's also this modernization and, you know, now the, the units are no longer. And then, you know, you' have parents living in back at home in the village and you're in, Nairobi or in a town, where you have other, unless you make it intentional to create those communities. community sort of settings. but yes, so it's, it's similar to that. a child belongs to the community or to the village or it takes a village to raise a child, how they say it. So yes.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 12:55

And as you you spent nearly two decades working across HIV and AIDS prevention. prevention. in those certain regions in Africa, was there a moment after your studies that led you into that work and into that healthcare system? Was there any moment that kind of brought you to that work?

RUTH KIMANI 13:16

yes. and, and that was the beginning for me, when I was in campus, because, uh, when HIV was, I was declared a national disaster in Kenya, that was around November, denied the late, uh, president, Daniel Arab Moy, the second president of this country. So the declaration then was sort of a massive turning point for Kenya? Because it broke years of denial. and, and also that is the moment where it led to the creation of national bodies and, you know, campaigns around total war against it is in that time, early 2000, that time I was around in my twenties and I was in campus. So it was a terrifying time at that point. Because it was also made worse by the kind of information that was being shared, either on television, on the print, you know, the information was quite frightening, know, because of, what the social stigma around HIV and AIDS, had carried. been linked to promiscuous behavior. Um,

um, so you can imagine navigating my youth against that background was and, and so even during that time when I was in campuses, when we had so many of organizations coming in, and, you know, talking about sexual reproductive health, engaging young people in different, ways of communicating, uh, you know, about sex and sexuality. And so it grew my interest. So I joined now the club because, you even growing up, uh, talking about sex was actually a taboo. I remember, when I went home, uh, that they were working, um, uh, at a club, uh, so I was, like a peer educator. So, you know, moving from either, clas to class or, or hostel to hostel, you know, distributing the flyers and all, and sometimes holding sessions around contraceptives. And also I remember there's a time I went with, a pack of condoms and, contraceptives, a pack of, uh, pills, the contraceptive pills family planning. and I, and I think I've forgotten my mom got hold of them. And so, I think she waited until we were going to sleep. Then she came quickly to the bedroom and sat on my bed and I was wondering what was happening. and then

she showed me the pack of condoms and I think she had taken, so you know, in my head I was like, let me wait where she's going with this, I did not, quick-

it, like, hold on, don't, don't think what you're thinking, so I wanted to have- I've never had a conversation with my parents sex and sexuality or issues to do with, you know, contraceptives and all that, or reproductive health. and that was the moment I was waiting for. Of course, it had all sorts of myths, you know, co from my mother and... you do not have a family, I don't know why you are having this family, you know. yeah, so, so that is the things that I found... Really, uh, enjoying, in terms of peer-to-peer education and working on these and looking for ways, innovative ways, creative ways of engaging young people. And sort of like, how do you call it, like, cause sex was really Demonized, you know?

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 16:41

Yes .

RUTH KIMANI 16:41

Uh, yes, so, I found So much to engage in very healthy constructive conversations when it comes to, uh, things you know, young people are grappling with as they are growing, so with my campus and also joining an organization then, that was also a peer education, a national peer education organization. I did a lot of that uh, empowe, youth development since still on HIV and all, and then, uh, got to engage also with other issues, you know, on women's rights, women's empowerment, even engaging with marginalized communities, with people with disability, um, information giving, and, life skills training. I found myself in that space and that's how I have, know, grown to even, now coming into Freedom Fund and working on child rights, child protection issues, and modern slavery. So it was, has been different topics, sort of like moving from one, uh, sort of, uh, position, working position, a community mobilizer, to a grant maker, know, to a program manager, designing programs with communities. so I've evolved plus also that time during HIV, uh, CDC and PEPFAR and USID programs were quite in this country. So, so I was sort of navigating, supporting different projects, wo in that on health system strengthening and all. Yeah. So basically that's how I interacted with this topic of HIV and in the community.

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:17

Ruth. seems to me it the kind of work that you even more important where basically, it sounds to me like you assess the organizations and their potential to have an impact on the community that, I take it there are many more organizations that would like funding than you're able to, to give. So you have to make those, uh, you have to make those, uh, kinds of assessments. is that

RUTH KIMANI 18:47

Yes. Yes.

BERT LOCKWOOD 18:48

I'm curious how go about that. Do you visit the different organizations? Or,

RUTH KIMANI 18:55

i can take you through um in terms of one with how freedom funds is operationalized or how how it works with a hotspot model that um we usually have a moment we call our inception period so an assessment has been done we have managed to identify a prevalent form of exploitation in a region so i'll give an example with kenya for instance when the assessment was done and child domestic work came as is something prominent something hidden something that we need to address uh so that's when i was hired one of the things that i was mandated to do is engage or identify organizations that are working in that space of child protection or child rights so what i did is in some is through referral and some is actually making those visits and getting to know these organizations how they work my style is also that is in terms of asking partners to bring or organizations to send in their proposals and all is to actually have a conversation is to get into their spaces and engaging in a conversation because what i've learned over time is they've always been this imbalances , you know, when it comes to, it's a donor and it's a donor. an organization in the community they will always want to put their best foot forward you know they would also want to gather funding this competition for resources but when you get into the level whereby i just want to know how you work and you know just to understand the work itself first even before getting to understand you don't have an office or you don't have certain structures so you know so it's not about checking a box so that at least now you are eligible for funding Uh, but also to be driven by the idea itself and also the, the community trust that this organization has sort of built over time. those are the conversations that I would have with partners. And Freedom Fund, the selected partners are those that then we work with for an year. We call it an inception period. So that collective organization for that one year, I guess, gi us also another chance to be able to see whether, interventions or their, you know, responses on the different are feasible. Or, are interventions that are actually effective for us to be able to take to scale or to be able to work with to sort of, you know, Address the issues that we are addressing. we are working on Um, so that is, how we engage with partners through an inception period within a year. And we, during that year, we also co-create solutions together. And that's usually been the exciting bit, um, you know, where we build the theory of change together. We, build in terms of who are the other organizations that we can collaborate with. Where can we align? Who are the right stakeholders to work with? So during that period, we also engage with each other. So that by the time we get into the multi-year, programming is with a program that we have agreed. It's with a strategy that we have agreed all of us collectively that this is what we are going to work with. And then now we move with them for a multi-year, uh, program, with an agreed upon, program strategy. So that's how we work.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:31

it's, i very inspiring. And, and Ruth, because we have joining us from Kenya. I was just curious that you have worked previously with us aid initiatives. And sadly we've seen this year with the Trump administration that there have been major cuts to us on international initiatives, and we're seeing the effects, of HIV and AIDS, n getting the treatments, the medication, the community awareness. A lot of those programs have had to stall because of lack of funding from your position. perhaps you have colleagues in different spaces in your former

organizations you've worked on, what are the ripple effects you've, you've heard or seen firsthand?

RUTH KIMANI 23:15

it has been difficult time for many, uh, because of those cuts and also because of, of, uh, knowing that it's actually funding that was supporting quite big projects, in the country. And, I've seen the impact. even with people losing their jobs, uh, the ripple effect also that comes with the family, because, you know, these are people who are employed and have children in school and, we have questions around our kind of education here. So you can imagine maybe children in private, private institutions. So, the impact on family because of, uh, people losing their jobs has been, you know, quite great. I was actually giving an example with, uh, because we are recruiting for Uganda for a program manager. and when we put out that advertisement, the number of applications that we got were enormous. I think it was 350 applications. And when you look the people where, while we are sort of like sorting and all, you know, you could just see

Chief of party USAID program or technical advisor at USAID program, but high seasoned professionals who are actually looking for a job. And, you know, I'm not saying that our program manager job was junior, but you can imagine that for a chief of party to actually think of, you know, is because it has gotten to a point where I need a job, uh, to be able to sustain, you myself. And even during that time when I was working, under this project, so there was actually a huge impact. I, I could actually give it to USAID that it, it's sort structured our health system, you know, to the level whereby our health systems structured in a way that there was a primary health care that was very close to the communities and ensuring that at that close of the communities, you have personnel, you have community health workers who are going door to door, distributing or doing immunization working with new mothers on MNCH. uh, I could see the impact of the work that we sort of, you know, were doing based on that particular funding and and, and, and governments were supported in that case. I know there is always an argument this need that needed to be met by governments and not necessarily delegated to NGOs, And that's why I think with this shift, there are conversations that, you know, it's funding being given to government so that they can continue. But I could see there was a role of the this sort Uh, initiatives. like health, with education, with nutrition. that now being taken away, it means now we need to, you know, as even as much as we're pushing for our governments to work effectively and to work in a way that is less corrupt, we're still having a challenge. so we still have a long way in terms of trust in our governments to do the right thing. yeah. So, but that is the situation we are in right now. and so, you know, having funders now filling in the gap that has been left with with the withdrawal of this funding. Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 26:32

I think that's why, individual donor support is so important. You know,

RUTH KIMANI 26:37

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 26:37

\$20, \$25 donation can actually stretch quite a far way. And when you mentioned Uganda, I was curious, because I remember when I was looking up numbers by Congress, our Congress by the Center for Global Development, our CDG, put out reports of estimated numbers behind what the cuts could be per country. And the Africa report published this and this is more from a 2025 estimation. But with the cut from the Trump administration for Uganda, it's up to \$306 million, which estimated is about 66% of the portion that the U. S. helped the country's programs for nonprofits. And that is a massive deficit, to put that on the Ugandan government, to put that on local communities in Uganda, that that's a devastating toll. So, that is why our global allyship is so imperative. And I do hope we see other international donors step up to the plate and help fill that void.

RUTH KIMANI 27:44

Yeah. And even just thinking of how maybe this would have happened, you know, because it actually came abrupt. Um, I know there are other governments that have tried to do this sort of like gradually, you know, even if it's withdraw or refocusing on, other issues. I remember there was a time when there were discussions, for instance, with the Dutch, government in terms of moving up. I were talking away from aid to trade. but the, the, the movement was gradual. It was not, know, immediately, uh, withdraw, so that at least you're giving time for countries to organize themselves, to be able to, like you said, in terms of, uh, Uganda to be able to see how best to fill that gap, and allowing at least civil society and, and citizens of that country to sort of have those public participation, to engage. And seeing how to better solve or bridge that

BERT LOCKWOOD 28:39

Now, of the themes I haven't heard you address so far, is, gender in the sense of, males being a problem in this area. Um, uh, uh, of the

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 28:54

is it most

BERT LOCKWOOD 28:56

Right. It's, it's young girls, but our, males part of the problem with respect to, I guess like attitudes toward girls getting education or not, breadwinners for the family or, that if they have place resources in the family, uh, sons are going to get a, uh, priority, with respect to education and the like.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 29:19

Ruth, if I may, a little context to that, cause that was my next question as well the programs you're overseeing through the freedom fund is in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Ethiopia. to piggyback off my dad, yes, is most of the hidden labor we're seeing in these homes done to the young girls versus that gender, you know, pu on the boys as well, or are we correct that it's mostly young girls?

RUTH KIMANI 29:48

yes, in terms of, cause we look at, uh, child domestic work, uh, quite gendered and, much on the girls. And this goes back with the kind of, uh, responsibility, when it comes to TIE to looking at the, roles and responsibility in a setup, there are those things that meant to be done. It's a boy and meant to be done. It's girl. and looking at. uh, the kind of, uh, work that the young girls will be involved in would be either childcare, house chores, if it's cleaning, cooking, and normally with this kind of, you know, roles and responsibilities are mainly, for girls. and so you'll find that with domestic work, a majority or a bigger percentage is actually, performed by girls and where you'd find that there are boys because there are studies in Kenya, for instance, when we did also the, the research, assessment, it wasn't so much on the research, but a context analysis. we came across, uh, boys, but the kind of, uh, work that they were sort of hired to do is either in families that had livestock. So it's either herding support with the herding,

you know, taking. and of animals or, guarding a shop or a place, owned by, the employer. So the kind of work that the house or the homeboys will be given will be not for the house, not to do the cleaning and taking care of the children, but with the other. So that doesn't mean that the boys are not involved in domestic work, but their roles are different from what the girls will do. So the girls will be inside the houses. Uh, yes, uh, working on that. And that's why you'd have a majority will be girls or young women in domestic work.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 31:42

And I'm going to share with our listeners in our show notes, a link to the video on the Freedom Funds website that

RUTH KIMANI 31:49

Mhm.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 31:49

is titled Labor". And what was so staggering to me that I didn't realize how big this number is globally is 10 million children around the world are in domestic servitude and labor.

That is a huge number. And Ruth, on LinkedIn, I saw that you had reposted and shared an article that my dad and I read, titled, "What three...

years of listening have taught us about child domestic work?" And this is by the global peer learning group. to quote, "They say simple solutions tend to fail because they simplify children's life." And one thing I thought was really interesting about this article is it discusses how children's voices are often sidelined in decision-making them. And I was curious in your work and the communities you work in. How do you include children's voices for the solutions?

RUTH KIMANI 32:52

Yeah, and I must say that I appreciate that you usually have those, uh, conversations with a peer network. It's a, it's a platform that we created, or rather established to, to support practitioners, because, uh, one of the things we realize is we, we might not have the solutions, you know, or we have interventions or, or responses that have been challenging in terms the effectiveness. So we come together through that space to be able to have that kind of exchange. and I usually call it as a space where even as a practitioner, you are safe and clear to be vulnerable, to say it's challenging, I don't know, it's complex, you know, uh, because, you know, sometimes you might beat ourselves up saying, but we are hired to do these things. We should have the answers. but in such a space, at least we know that we are not able just be, be right and, uh, use the space to, ask ourselves even questions. And most of the time when we leave that place or. So that we brought on the table, but come about a bit with more questions, that we still need to get answers for. the bit of, uh, child participation, and also creating spaces where, children would be free. U, you'll be able to also have their voice. you realize that even, well, they are being taken away, um, either to that particular work or be moved from their home to go stay in, in a relative's or a friend's relative's place. Um, I don't think their decision was solved. Um, and so this is something that, wa usually decided upon, for them. for us in our programming, we've made it a deliberate effort to ensure that we are not repeating even as we are thinking about solutions. Um, we have, uh, we have, uh, the children or the, the at risk children who maybe are at risk of entering into domestic work or even the survivors of a child domestic work or child domestic work who are already in those situations that are in the room, uh, to have those conversations, to be able to also, know, input on, on the interventions that we are thinking about, in involving them. ... With our programming we have created, like in Ethiopia for instance, there's a partner who has created a safe, safe space, and safe space is within the communities where they know that often when a child is leaving the employers, maybe going to the market, or has been sent to fetch water or do something, will always pass this route, or has been given an allowance on, on a Sunday or on a Sunday or on a Sunday. So, that safe space. Some of our partners utilizes to engage for peer-to-peer support or for any kind of, you know, um, service, you know, even if it's, uh, commodities, that that young girl can be able to access through that particular safe space. Uh, we have opportunities where we, we have partners who have. we have, uh, like, like a small child parliament, uh, within, you know, one of the shelters, where the children who have been rescued and are in those shelters, have a child parliament, have created a child parliament, to be able to use that space for growth in terms of leadership. Um, and in terms of thinking around the kind of services that they require in such a space that would make them feel safe and happy. and, and, and we've also seen and working on opportunities where we form advisory groups, uh, also as part of our programming, where the children again, or the survived survivors use the space to actually inform, our intervention. So in various ways, uh, we have tried to ensure that at we are engaging children in the thinking, so that we do not repeat the same thing that, that happened to them, that other people are making decisions for them, but are actually doing that. I know some of the time we have been confronted the challenge of ensuring that, the involvement is ethical, and then we are not just extracting information, uh, from them.

Um, and, uh, and, uh, and, uh, we have engaged other practitioners who are also supporting us programs. or, or the engagement that we have with children or survivors is ethical. and that we have put the, the safeguards, to ensure that even when they're called upon, for instance, because we have young children who sometimes, or survivors who are called upon to go into conferences or to go into other meetings and where you find sometimes in those spaces, the not child friendly. or the, the, the, you know, they are, uh, sharing information that again makes them, because it has a traumatic experience, for instance. them because of sharing these stories. so we are, are very, keen to ensure that, even as we are engaging the young girls or the children, um, is, to ensure that you, you do not have to tell your story. you, you also need time to be able to, you know, go through, that and we provide the, the, the, the counseling and support that is needed to be able for this child to be able to get the, the restoration that she needs. so that at least even when she's ready to use her voice, and talk about her story to Zabi, through her own empowerment and not through coercion to be able to just, you know, share. Share the story so t with our partners and while we are sort of supporting them to ensure that we, we re-learn that. We re-learn the element of thinking that only when I have vulnerable child is when I'll be known that I'm working or I am doing the right thing because I have a child who I have rescued. So that shouldn't be the marker of, you know, you have rescued, but also taking that child through a process where the child gets, or the girl gets her dignity know, and then now she can find her voice and be able to use her voice to do the advocacy. You know, do the advocacy, it's a and I must say that it's one of the things you know, going back to the question on funding, uh, you know, that, that you find because of the way funding is structured, you know, has a limit.

So it's, uh, you know, that. Let's say that. Unfortunately, you cannot project ties care, you know, or the wellness, because it's, it takes time and we cannot say that. I will be free and okay in a year, or in two years, you know, because so funding, and that's why I appreciate freedom funding. Here I'm not just saying that because I'm freedom fund But also thinking around what we do with our unrestricted funding, you know, that it's not tied to any indicator. So allowing a partner to make a decision of how they'd want to use our funding. and it's not bound on sort of years, but you can, walk the journey with the different, you're working in. So, it's also to call upon that we, when you're looking at wellness and care and healing, it takes time and requires, uh, know, investment is not bound on, on timelines. Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:10

do you strategically individual stories, success stories, to promote your work?

RUTH KIMANI 40:17

Yes, we do. We do. uh, carefully, you know, uh, with, with the ethical standards in each, which are, The identity is hidden. but we use, uh, some of these stories because I think it's when you say the stories is when you get you to understand the gravity of issues. So, yes, w do. We do use the.

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:37

Yeah, absolutely. Th,th individual stories are so much more powerful than statistics.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:43

And being able to put. Yeah. In those shoes. You know, if you're hearing a story from, let's say an 11 year old young girl, well, all of us, girl or boy, non-gender, we were all 11 years old. Uh, and think that, they part of domestic labor at 11 years old. I think a lot of people don't realize the vastness of what child labor is. You know, a lot of times we think, like you said, perhaps it's at a factory and you can, use a union to go in and, know, break it up. But when it is at a home and it might be, you know, an extended family member, I really resonated talking about finding those. In the community, a stir, to be able to have access to enter that home and to have that trust. And one thing I really appreciate about the freedom of a model that you touched on is trust-based funding and trusting your partners on the ground who are embedded in their community and they know where those funds need to go and how they need to be spent. Because a lot of times in the humanitarian nonprofit space, it is restricted funding. There's a lot of red tape. There's a lot of barriers. But what Freedom Fund does is puts its faith in the model that they've seen work. Could you talk a little more for our listeners to really understand where those dollars go in terms of the trust-based funding, I know that the Freedom Fund in the African programs has invested more than 26 million in frontline partners, which has impacted more than 223,000 people. So the impact of the Freedom Fund and Ruth, your work and your team's

BERT LOCKWOOD 42:26

is

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 42:27

work, is so dynamic and you're reaching so many people in so many communities.

RUTH KIMANI 42:33

Yes. And are happy our strategy that we have for 2025, 2030, that realisation that, we'd have to in a collective ensuring that we are moving the funds closer to the people who are impacted with the issue. I was hired, actually, let me give that as something that actually made me be very because our values were aligned with Freedom Funds. is also with the fact uh, looking operationally, we believe in, uh, structure, so it is not about having a big office, you know, but for most of the staff in the different hotspot, countries, we work remotely. Working from home, but ensuring that at least, eh, most of the funding within those country hotspots goes to the programs, the partners, the partners themselves, so, for me, that was something we really appreciated, that, there's an effort to ensure that, that at least 70% of our funding within a country actually goes to grants, uh, to partners, supporting the partners themselves. and as the hotspot model, in terms of bringing... ..instead of organization in its different, portfolios, so you have organizations that are big national, and the organizations that are very grassroots. it's a, it's, it's an interesting mix of partners, you know, that when you mobilize and you bring together, the question that Bert was asking me about how we are able to identify, this organization. ... We also look for organizations that, once, once they come together as a collective, they're leveraging on each other, in terms of knowledge, in terms of resources ...in terms of, you know, such that even for the national organizations, can actually be peers for the

grassroots organizations. So there's the support for each other. And what forms, uh, with that collective is what we usually call a community of practice. ...um, and where we ensure that as community of practice, of that group of organizations, either 12, in some countries in, in Ethiopia, for instance, we had a total of 29 partners when we began ... in Nigeria, we A cluster of seven partners in Lagos. So this, ... they form a community of by engaging on quarterly meetings and conversations is where now they begin to build... ...or, opportunities for shared knowledge, uh, and opportunities to ensure that at least we are thinking about the different cases, ...that we are dealing with and ensuring that these are, you know, continuous, re-follow, ... loop where, you know, uh, the different cases are getting the services. So that is, one element, that is very keen for us in terms of forming that community of practice. ... Yesterday I in a room... ... partners who were discussing about, uh, the national policy in the elimination of child labor, ... and how I saw the partners engaging with the Ministry of, of Labour, uh, you know, questioning. ... There's a session of paper that, uh, t had, uh, they were tabling for partners to seek feedback. ... I would think if it was some time back, you know, anything that is tabled, maybe you just induce it and pass. ... but here I could see, uh, partners really pushing back on certain sections within the document and, and asking the Ministry to just... tweak some sentences or add some clauses and I felt proud. ... I was like, this is what it means, that, that at least, uh, civil society free and comfortable to actually be able to question. know, either a policy or practices or reforms that are being tabled. an that is what the power of that sort of, you know, community of practice has enabled us to get,

BERT LOCKWOOD 46:24

I just wanted to how remarkable that is because, when there is funding, uh, available, it of silos, if you will, that, ... you won't have, different organizations doing work together because they feel to get funding, they need to do it in their own name because competing and- so I'm intrigued by your experience being able uhm, encourage these groups to work together.

RUTH KIMANI 46:57

and it's one of- we've so much to push for that kind of collaboration and coordination, because, you know, we might keep more or less like what you're saying in terms of this competition- competition of resources, uh, now the same resources are shrinking. so, we also need to recognize that with the shrinking, funding, we need to find ways of how to be able to utilize whatever is available. and instead of replicate- I mean, duplicating efforts, because you find that we might have a huge number civil society organization and sometimes duplicating efforts, you know?

BERT LOCKWOOD 47:35

Uhm,

RUTH KIMANI 47:35

and then collaboration- Mm-hmm . Uh, coll, or building that community of practice also addresses the beat of duplication, uh, because if I'm the same, I mean the same sub city and I- working on prevention and you come in and you come in and you come into the same sub city, work on prevention, then , yes, your resource should be used on protection so that I continued

in prevention, you know? and- and I- and I saw that in Uganda, which I also found very interesting with- with- a local council- they're called the local council- they're called LC1s, local council- Administrative unit within the district, and, and- uh, with him, I think because he has worked in the- in the- in the civil society and understands most of the thing. what he has made a deliberate effort is that he has data about the organizations or, NGO CBOs working in, in his region. And so whenever a donor comes, so when we went to have a conversation with him, He had all this information and they're like 'if you're coming in, I think our gap is here'. So don't come and do this kind of work. Our gap is on. So you can be able to address that gap. And, you know, those are the kind of leaders that, you know, you'd be looking forward to who the community needs and is able to guide. development partners who are coming into the region. And so also with our partners is also ensuring that they hear each other and leverage on each resources. And what our funding has also is on flexible that also we based on the that come because, you know, we are in a changing context. And so, you know, the cost of living would go a different regime might come and change things. And so we also try as much as possible to listen to our partners and to be able to adjust our budgets and our funding accordingly to be for them to be able to, to. So it is not set on stone that what you wrote on your proposal, eh, when we began in 2020, that is the same in 2025. So it will keep keep changing based on the, on the changing environments. so the flexibility of funding also helps us to be able to work with partners

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 49:51

one thing that's so great about the Freedom Fund is on their website, they publish the evaluation results that you and partners that are global partners. let's say you're working on a pilot program. For instance, you mentioned Lagos, Nigeria. And I know in January of this year, the Freedom Fund published their evaluation report, which again, for our audience, I will link in the show notes so you can read it yourself. But what I was really intrigued is just how many partners you worked with to bring together this recent evaluation, which was led by NORC at the University of Chicago. you partnered with the Kana Group, which implemented the program with the, if I'm going to say this correctly, the Devotop Center for Africa Development. You worked with CapRights and Street Projects Foundation. So, you work with a lot of partners. Like we had said earlier, it takes a village to raise children. It takes a village to make real lasting impact and results. It takes a village to make real lasting impact and that you don't always have all the answers or solutions, but you'll do pilot programs to test them because in Lagos, there's thousands of children currently behind those hidden doors in child labor. And what I interested if you would be able to expand, It says in the report that one tool you and your partners used was media campaigns to promote education and awareness, because many people don't understand that child labor in the homes is equivalent to modern day slavery. What kind of media campaigns and media platforms do you use to locals?

RUTH KIMANI 51:35

Yeah. Thank you for that. And it's interesting because that is in my programming, I did a lot of behavior change communication, and supported a lot in terms of, uh, you know, thinking of materials that are relevant. IN TERMS OF, YOU KNOW, THINKING OF MATERIALS THAT ARE RELEVANT FOR for communicating particularly on groups that are either semi illiterate know,

or breaking down, very complex issues in a manner of which, uh, can be palatable, to the community. so when you're looking at the different media platforms and the media that we use is both traditional and, what we call digital now digital, both traditional and digital. Um, and with traditional media is where the community theater comes in. Um, and so in, in, in Lagos, we've partnered with one of the organization street project foundation that uses, uh, they call it at voice, act-vocacy, uh, you know, using act, to be able to do advocacy. and sort of forming a small, know, skits, or spoken word, or, you know, to be able to speak these issues. and, and so that is what we, we are working when it comes to community awareness, as you've said, one of the things that is very, very, common with the issue of, uh, child domestic workateer has been normalized. Um, so nobody usually see it as a big issue. I remember there was one partner here working on, um, prosecution following up on cases. And, I remember there was an experience she was sharing when she was saying that when I take this case to the police officer, you know, after, being informed that there's a child, there's an elderly child in a certain home working. And they might, they had might be some physical abuse. So when the police heard of the case, the police was asking, has this child been defiled? so on, but she's working in this, and she's not supposed to be working in this situation. the police is not so, you know, uh, informed that that is actually should be an issue that requires his attention, but he's looking for a grave issue that can be sort of followed. So according to them, that is, that is not grave. It's okay. I mean, the child is in a home. So what's a big issue about it? and so when it comes to community awareness and, and using these different forms of media, it means that we, we have to create messages that would, uh, help the communities to sort of, you know, how do I call it? like denormalize, denormalize so that they see it as it's actually, you know, like a reflection. It's actually, yeah, I had not thought about it. Actually, you know, and so those plays, those community theater, those spoken words, uh, getting ourselves into radio spots and talking about it because, you know, r have a bigger listenership,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 54:33

And, you know, when people are doing their daily commutes, know, I think in all of our big metropolitan cities, traffic is a problem and people sit in their cars and just getting to hear something on the radio, even if you're not a hundred percent paying attention, it can truly be absorbed and it might spark something. You're like, oh, I heard about that

RUTH KIMANI 54:51

yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 54:51

on the radio.

RUTH KIMANI 54:52

yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 54:53

And, and I also love that you take it to the theater, you take it to a playhouse, you know, you have that live interaction

RUTH KIMANI 54:59

yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 54:59

that really is awareness and education. And bringing people together.

RUTH KIMANI 55:03

yeah, One of the things I really about that, um, and I'll go back to my, time doing HIV work, what we did is, asked children in school, to write stories about HIV, what they know about HIV and all. And, turned those scripts, the scripts that the young children came up with, into films, into short films. It was what we used to call them global dialogues. And those short-flowing films are the ones that would either aired in the TV or, you know, talked about in the radio. And so, it will have the name of the child who wrote it, you know, script written by and produced by. And it was really nice to have children knowing that they could actually do a production that goes into the TV. I, some of these young children, now they are older men would always, you know, when we meet them, you know, you made me, actually, my name appear on TV. Yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:05

And it's so exciting to see your name publicized.

RUTH KIMANI 56:07

yeah, it's exciting.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:08

Yeah.

RUTH KIMANI 56:09

So, so I know, I know TV, radio, it has an impact because you always remember something,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:15

And Ruth, for the children that you support it in your team support, cause I know you are a mighty, mighty

RUTH KIMANI 56:21

yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:21

team,

RUTH KIMANI 56:21

yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 56:22

across, different countries. When we use the, air quotes over here, success story is a standard vision for success for the children you support and uplift. it attract to education? Is it a track to economic opportunities? Could you walk us through how the long-term vision is to bring a children out of domestic work into a path to lead them to success and how you define what that is? And if there perhaps is a story that one of the children your team might have worked of course, again, if it's okay to share their story, you know, with their permission, because like you said, it's a long-term social work aspect to it,

RUTH KIMANI 57:07

I know with success stories, and especially when it comes to, these issues is a lot of things happen, you know, uh, take, for instance, that particular child and looking at this systems around that particular child. And so for me, success would be looking at, if this child has been removed out of an exploitative situation, this child has gone through the needed, therapy, healing, psychosocial support, within the institution or within the setup that child is particularly in it. U, and, again, this child belongs to a family. The a reason as to why this child was in an exploitative situation in the first place. and so it's also looking at, has the issues that forced the child to go into this situation resolved? Uh, and that is, is how is the economic situation of the family? and just going back to the global platform, that is one of the dilemmas practitioners usually have. I think, you know, we're talking about our best interests of the child, maybe the best interests of the child might be, maybe not to remove the child immediately, but being able to pass gets to understand the, the situation in which that brought that child to that, to that particular space. So we have had stories, you know, um, and, and, and the patterns for me, these stories are usually the patterns. I usually recognize the patterns that. eh, and you'd find that the story would be, 12 years old, ehm, because I get an opportunity to, to read so many of these stories from our partners' reports, and you get to see the patterns are similar. So, it is, I've been, called by a family, friend, or an auntie to come into the city, eh, to be able to, go to school. but upon reaching, whatever was promised, I did not go to school. So, maybe I was asked to stay home until resources are found for me to be able to go to school, and in the meantime, when I'm staying in that home, I am supporting with housework, and it goes on like that, supporting with housework, without ever going to school, but at home, ah, the parents have not been told, and at home, the auntie who is now taking care of this child is sending some money back home, or is, you know, uh, sending some shopping, ah, back home. So, the family back home might not know that the situation of this child has, is still the same, becaus already they are being, they are finding that they are being sorted out, you know, their needs are being sorted out by this. So, for them, the are thinking their child is fine. Um, you find that in situations where a child has been isolated like that the communication between her and the family is cut off, so maybe might not even have a phone to be able to be calling home, and might stay here long in this home, without ever going home. So, that isolation already is making this child vulnerable and is under of this family. and so, as a practitioner, once you realize that, taking this child out,

again, and knowing what is happening at home, might not be the solution first, but maybe to begin engaging, with home, and also with the family here, you know, with, with the employer,

if the employer is accessible, that is. and you find those, those are the kind of stories that we engage in. so, you find that, once you make those determinations, uh, and then you can be able to, to remove the child and take to the safe place and have, uh, partners, or people engaging with a family and to be able to also find ways where they can access safety nets or social protection to be able to have, have livelihoods that will be able to support this. The dilemmas are multiple, because if you,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:01:04

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RUTH KIMANI 1:01:04

if you, if you cut off this supply and without knowing what support will be provided back at home, chances are even reintegrating this child back at that situation might be difficult, because they, they may be hatred. You know, it's because you, maybe you went and said something. Now, we are not getting the shopping or the food that we were used to get. Um, so, so this child going back into the same situation might, it's very high, or even not being able to reintegrate it. There's a story where there was a child who, disappeared from home, disappeared from home, from the home where she and went to the streets. And now became sort of, you know, a beggar, in the streets. Again, another yet vulnerable situation or exploded situation, uh, where, she was defiled. And before, by the time she was being rescued and back to to a shelter. Now, with a child, you know, pregnant and now has given birth So the thing again is now taking a child with a child back home who left, you know, again, there' issues of stigma you have to deal with.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:07

Yes.

RUTH KIMANI 1:02:07

So the cases are so many for me, recounting these certain things as success, it's something that, you know, that will take time. Maybe it's a success because a child has been rescued. Success. A success because a family has gotten, um, livelihoods now they are not dependent on the child, getting into exploitative situation. A success when a government, policy, you know, is being enforced, you know, because we have those policies. So once they're being enforced and we have the correct regulations and measures put in place, it's a success. yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:02:41

that is such a great answer. And I don't, and you know what, I don't think many times we hear that exact answer that sometimes success is just getting, you know, the knock at the door by a community member to be let in and to have that conversation, to spark that first initial meeting, to say, this is actually not right, but we, we can help you correct this. And if you can allow the child to perhaps go to school or like you said, maybe if it's switching homes, but at the end of the day, a lot of these children are, part of people's families. And it's not as easy as A to B, you know, like the work you do is so layered. and, and every single child's story is different. I think sometimes we have to remember that you cannot group it all together. That's

not fair to the child. It's not fair to the experiences and that's not really going to do long-term solutions that we need.

RUTH KIMANI 1:03:33

exactly. Spot on.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:03:34

well, Ruth and I was wondering, for our community, what are ways that they can support your work and, and ways that they could get involved?

RUTH KIMANI 1:03:43

for us, maybe to support us would be, uh, we have our website, freedomfund.org, where we, put information about this work and the kind of partners that we're supporting, and even with the kind of investment you are just quoting in terms of what it takes to be able to support this work. and so that would be, a, a first point of engagement is to get into our website and seeing the ways of which you can be able to support our work. and we also have, the impact reports and research that we conduct in the different regions that we work in, that we publish. again, this also, you know, for, for people who would want to find out, the evidence that is backing this kind of work. then we have that kind of research that you could engage in and get familiarized with yourself and even subscribe, uh, to be getting like daily updates of, of this kind of work. kind of work, so our website, at least provides uh, information in places ways it can be able to support us and support the work.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:04:41

Perfect. And I'll make sure to add the donation link, if anyone is able to donate. like we said, the Freedom Fund does incredible trust-based funding, for on the ground, grassroots partners. So, Ruth, this has been such an honor. And my dad, I could speak for us. We're so happy to be a lot of us. We so happy to be a lot of us. We're so happy to spotlight these really important issues and create our own education.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:05:03

Ruth, this has been a real privilege.

RUTH KIMANI 1:05:05

Yes.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:05:05

Thank you. Thank you very much for sharing your insights and story. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Thank you. Thank you. Thank Thank Thank

RUTH KIMANI 1:05:09

you so much. And it's lovely to see father and daughter doing this. I, I was really looking forward to meeting both of you.

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:05:19

Thank you for joining us for this conversation with Ruth Kamani. Modern slavery continues to affect millions of people around the world, but as Ruth reminded us today, sustainable change depends on investing in local organizations, trusting community leaders, and addressing the root causes of exploitation before it begins. To learn more about the Freedom Fund, explore their research and impact, or support their work to end modern slavery, please visit the links in today's show notes. If you've enjoyed today's conversation, we hope you'll subscribe to Human Rights Conversations Across Generations, leaving us a rating or review on your favorite podcast platform, and share this episode with your friends, family, and colleagues. Your support helps us continue bringing robust discussions with leading human rights advocates, practitioners, and scholars to audiences around the world. We'll see you next time.