



**PART 1** | STORIES OF ORIGIN, SIERRA LEONE

# Risking life and limb: Trafficking is the only form of recruitment for Sierra Leoneans headed to the GCC

In the first of a two-part report on Sierra Leone we explore the reasons the post-war generation are especially vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation

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# table of contents

**PART 1:**

**Risking life and limb: Trafficking is the only form of recruitment for Sierra Leoneans headed to the GCC 3**

A pyramid scheme 6

An Emerging Sisterhood 8

Desperation of the post-war generation 12

Power of the Societies 15

Sierra Leone Labour Migration Policy 2022 15

**PART 2:**

**Battered not beaten, Sierra Leonean women pick up the cudgels 16**

The heavy hand of law enforcement in Kuwait 18

A seed, a sprout, and a way out of abject poverty 24

The stereotypes that criminalise victims of trafficking 26

## PART 1

**Risking life and limb:** Trafficking is the only form of recruitment for Sierra Leoneans headed to the GCC

If you are so inclined, there is a ‘program’ for you. A program tailored closely to what you dream of. There is a steep price tag attached to these programs, but that doesn’t deter the poor and the desperate. With more than 25% of the population living on less than US\$1.9 a day, Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, and there is a perception amongst the younger generation that nothing is going to improve anytime soon. There are stacked vulnerabilities, for women in particular, with 61% of those in the 15-19 age group subject to female genital mutilation (going up to 95% in the 45-49 age group). Preying on this insecurity, the men and women peddling the programs are Sierra Leone’s version of snake oil salesmen. And they are as slippery as they come; persistent and helpful until you reach the airport at Conakry and Accra and are handed documents in a foreign language, headed to a destination and a job you know little about. The agents, usually with a generic name – a John or a Mary – make themselves scarce once the candidate has boarded the flight.

From most places outside the West African region, getting to Sierra Leone is a task – flights, ferries, and buses are all pressed into service to get you into the country. Yet, hundreds of women risk life and limb – quite literally, for some – making that journey out, and often return in a shroud of shame and stigma.

Alima is dressed in a bright yellow velveteen tracksuit set, shiny white sneakers, freshly braided hair, long colourful stick-on plastic nails and a white knock-off designer purse that she clutches to her chest throughout the long flight from Addis Ababa to Accra to Lungi. After exchanging hesitant smiles, it’s only at the end of the first leg that she opens up. Her point of departure was Dubai, the day had been long, it was Eid al-Fitr, and she was eager to reach home and reunite with her young son to celebrate the festival.

She peeks into her purse every so often. Arranging and rearranging her braids as she watches her reflection on the cracked phone screen. She then browses photos of her six-year-old son from the last few years. He has grown in her absence, she sighs. A few times she takes out her passport and flips through the pages. She is eager to promote her country to the first-time visitor, guaranteeing that the food would be great and the beaches lovely. The next time she flips through her passport, she offers a glimpse. There are only three stamps. The exit from Conakry (Guinea), the entry and exit from Dubai. There are no visa stickers. She takes out a sheet of paper folded into a small rectangle to fit into her purse. “This is my outpass, do you think I am banned? Will I be able to go back?”

She left home in March 2021, just over two years earlier, with the promise of a job in Dubai as a cleaner. She recalls her story in starts and stops. “Dubai too much stress, I did not want to work as a housemaid, but they said I have to pay money to come back.” So she took matters into her own hands, fled the agent’s office and found odd jobs, until it got too tough for her to continue. “I am a Muslim,” she says – sitting up straighter, expressing pride in that part of her identity – “and an Islamic group I am part of paid for my flight ticket to come back.” She continues to fret over what the outpass (an official exit permit for people who overstay their visas) dictates, in a language she does not understand. Her return home is a transit, before the next appealing program comes her way.

*“I HAD A WOUND IN MY LEG, IT STARTED SWELLING, AND I HAD A LOT OF PAIN. I WAS WORKING WITHOUT GLOVES OR SHOES, AND ALL THOSE CHEMICALS INFECTED MY LEG, THE DOCTOR TOLD ME LATER.”*

Just a few months before Alima’s flight back home, Musu took a similar journey. From Dubai to Doha to Accra to Freetown. But she came back an amputee, the stitches around the stump of her left knee yet to heal. To reach her home in Allen Town, a crowded neighbourhood in the capital city Freetown, one must leave the tar road and enter a dirt track, with several inclines that even an SUV struggles to navigate. In a cul-de-sac with a stunning view of the Atlantic coast is her seamstress shop-cum-home. A few steps up from the dirt road is the front room that has a couple of old sewing machines, the vestiges of her trade before she left to Dubai, now rundown from years of disuse. A curtain separates this space from the rest of the small house that one assumes includes a loft as noises permeate from the ceiling. Musu is seated in a wheelchair that still has the airline tag on it.

In 2021, in order to provide a better future for her siblings, Musu connected with an agent online who was selling a program to Dubai for US\$3000. Her school friends who had found jobs through him had given the referral. “He promised me a job as a seamstress, same as what I do here. But when I reached Dubai I was made to work as a housemaid.”

Like Alima’s passport, Musu’s has only four stamps. The exit and entry from Freetown and the entry and exit (12 April 2023) from Dubai. She was taken on a visit visa ([frequently misused to traffick people into the UAE and for illegal recruitment](#)), and she racked up a huge fine for overstaying, yet reluctant to return without making some money at least. She undertook odd jobs, staying in bed spaces in Deira when she could afford it, and sleeping in parks when she was short of money. In November 2022, she found a job as a cleaner at a restaurant run by a Nigerian lady. “I worked there for two months and got food to eat and AED700. I was managing, but then I had a wound in my leg, it started swelling, and I had a lot of pain. I was working without gloves or shoes, and all those chemicals infected my leg, the doctor told me later.”

When the wound became worse and started emanating a rancid odour, she was asked not to come in to work, but was not provided medical care to take care of it either. “Because that time I didn’t have money, didn’t have visa, I was so afraid. I stayed on the streets, slept in Naif park. My manager asked me not to call the ambulance because she was afraid of getting into trouble, but she did not help me either,” Musu says, playing a voice note where the manager warns her against going to the authorities. “But, when the bleeding would not stop, I called the ambulance. Twice. Both times they dressed my leg in the park. They asked me for papers to go to the hospital and I did not have anything.”



*Musu has returned from Dubai, an amputee, without any compensation. Neither the employer she worked for nor the agent have helped her. If you wish to help with her rehabilitation, please donate here with a note “Musu”. Proceeds will be used for her physical therapy and to help her re-establish her seamstress business.*

A few Sierra Leoneans alerted to her plight, took her to the Al Baraha hospital in late January. Musu remembers the date of her amputation – 3 March 2023 – but the rest of the timeline in that period is a blur. She was asked to pay AED6700 (US\$1820) for the treatment, which she was unable to. “I have no medical records or documents, just a few photos from the hospital [which she shows on her phone]. They said they can’t give me my records if I don’t pay, but I could leave. Some of my Sierra Leonean brothers and sisters let

me stay with them, and an American man who saw my state gifted me the wheelchair.” Neither when the ambulance service came to her aid nor when she was admitted at the hospital were the police called to investigate her case. She managed to gather enough money for a ticket home, and went to immigration to be repatriated. Though she reached out to the Sierra Leonean embassy they did not help her, she claims. Just over a month after her amputation, Musu arrived in Freetown. Her mobility is severely restricted both due to lack of physical therapy and the fact that her home is not wheelchair accessible. She looks fondly at the foot pedal model of sewing machines. “I can take care of myself, but I need different (mechanised) machines. I have no money.” As Musu speaks in a whisper, appearing too tired and in too much pain to even be heard, her mother seated on a stool in one corner of the room sobs into her sarong. Abdul, her 20-year-old brother is restless, and jumps at the opportunity to share his thoughts. “I was hoping to go abroad too. My sister was supposed to send money for my program, to help me.” His sister’s predicament does not deter him. He still has plans to go abroad.

Asmaa Kamara James, a broadcast journalist and feminist advocate, thinks there is a degree of stubbornness that gets young women and men into trouble, as they travel despite the evidence of trafficking. “They feel they can only survive in another man’s country. They want to sit on a plane, to travel. Seeing young girls in airports I can notice this trend.”

It only follows that there are ‘scammers’ here that tap into that desire and aspiration, she says. “They go through Guinea, because they may be stopped here. The young girls keep it a secret. I am not sure if the government is doing enough. When there’s a problem, perhaps. They only react to issues.”

*“IF YOU BRING 10 MORE PEOPLE WHO SIGNED UP FOR THE PROGRAM AS WELL, THEN YOU HAVE TO PAY LESS THAN THOSE INDIVIDUALS.”*

## **A pyramid scheme**

Whatever the intent, the programs find their target. Katie Milazzo of World Hope International (WHI, a Christian relief and development organisation working with vulnerable and exploited communities) says the programs are more of a pyramid scheme, and there’s a very large underbelly of a political system that profits from it, and some politicians are benefitting from it whether they have established the system or not.

“You have someone coming to a high school and saying ‘hey, we can send you, you know, to America or can send you somewhere else. You pay this fee, bring us your ID, tell us your parents’ name, your address, basic information.” But it doesn’t end there. The program takes a turn as the facilitators hired by traffickers lure young women in deeper. “If you

bring 10 more people who signed up for the program as well, then you have to pay less, than those individuals.”

Dubious players get access to schools and teachers by flashing an ID or a badge and claiming to be from the US embassy or some official-sounding organisation. They sell a dream, a great adventure, that your life is going to change for the better. But the young girls and boys are taken somewhere outside the border of Sierra Leone and dropped there to fend for themselves. And now, it goes beyond being left in Mali or Mauritania, to as far as to the Gulf.

Katie says one cartel was busted a few months ago. An East African man with a fake Sierra Leonean accent and mannerisms was selling programs. “We sent someone in, to sign up and video record the whole thing, to get an understanding of what was happening. It starts out as this is a great adventure, your life is gonna change, you’ll go to the US or Dubai. The girl was a 17-year-old about to start nursing school. But they told her she will be a nurse in Dubai. And they knew she was underage. Another woman pretended to be her mother. They let her stay for a while, but eventually said for the privacy of others, they could not let her in, and separated the two. With every step of the interview she was taken closer to meeting the main guy. That’s how we knew the guy at the top of the racketing ring was the East African.”

This information was taken to the government by WHI, and the ring was busted. Then they were faced with another challenge. “So then we had the problem of how you need to identify who is a victim and who is a facilitator in this situation. But the reality was a lot of the facilitators were also victims. They were in this situation because you either pay this fee or you help recruit all these other people.”

Katie’s colleague, Sr Miriam, says these people who refer to themselves as agents go to vulnerable communities where people run small businesses, because they have to have the money to pay. “The program is a means to get out of Sierra Leone. You won’t even know where you are going till you’ve paid the money and reached the airport.” And it strikes you hard that you are not headed to Canada or Australia as promised but to Saudi or Kuwait. By then it’s too late to turn back.

Even anti-trafficking schemes are quickly turned into opportunities for trafficking. “The IOM, for instance, gives packages to those trafficked to Mali or other places, to return them to their home countries. So the traffickers drop them off in those countries where these packages are offered. Usually young mothers and children. They will go there and start begging. They will then reach out to IOM and get the US\$1000 package, a cut of which goes to the trafficker. The IOM is aware of this ploy and attempts are made to ensure only the deserving are helped through these packages, says Sr Miriam.

In regards to trafficking, and in particular, [the case of Sierra Leoneans trafficked by sea to Accra that MR reported on previously](#), Asmaa is certain that corruption among the coast guards and other officials allow it to happen. “The society is not discussing it as a serious issue. We have a problem of attitude, not just lack of information.”

Princess, Sr Miriam’s colleague who works in Liberia, says borders are not monitored, almost deliberately. In reference to the trafficking of women from Sierra Leone to Ghana via Liberia, and onwards to the Gulf, “You know, there are officials that say ‘I’m going to ignore that if there is a payout’ ...I mean, like 12 days at sea and the coast guards don’t see them?”

Sr Miriam points out that the bigger question is who sees this trafficking route, what is their involvement or how do they benefit from deliberately not seeing them.

*ONE DAY THE BOY BIT ME,” SHE LAUGHS, WIGGLING THE PINKIE, OR WHAT REMAINS OF IT. WITH HER FINGER BLEEDING, AND THE BITTEN PART HANGING LOOSE, SHE WAS THROWN OUT OF THE HOME.*

## **An Emerging Sisterhood**

The patterns of exploitation and the methods of trafficking remain more or less the same, but the geographical boundaries are ever-expanding according to the experts MR spoke to. Young, vulnerable people, mainly women, see no future for themselves within the country and believe going abroad is critical to the survival of their families, says Lucy Turay, who had been trafficked herself and is now working with rural communities to nip this in the bud. Lucy, who established the [Domestic Workers Advocacy Network \(DoWAN\)](#) in 2020 soon after her return from Lebanon, sometimes sees herself as a victim and sometimes as a survivor, but regardless she is a force. DoWAN, which means sisterhood in the local language Temne, provides a training centre in Makeni for women like her – who see themselves sometimes as both victims and survivors, depending on the triggers they face in a day.

Aminata is part of the sisterhood. She has a favourite sewing machine at the training centre, in the first row closest to the window, with a lot of natural light. She dons her glasses only when she has to sew, focussed on threading the needle, fixing the bobbin and lining up the fabric, all the time the pinkie of her left hand sticking out – a part of it missing. On the day she shares her story she is altering the clothes of one of her children. Children who thought she had died in Kuwait when they heard nothing from her. It was just before the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone.

Her husband’s friend lured them with a program, which they financed with the sale of their house. She reached Kuwait via Guinea-Abidjan-Ethiopia, but stayed only briefly in the



home she was deployed to. Aminata's smile does not wane, only gives way to giggles and laughs, as if she were regaling an audience. "The baba who buy me from the office sold me to a woman in Saudi. He said it was his sister. First thing he did was take my phone away saying he bought me, I was a slave and there was no need to speak to my children. I was taken by road from Kuwait to Saudi, to his sister Maryam. I didn't know where I was, but I saw these big oil factories just before we entered the town where she lived."

Aminata had to do all the household work, and care for two children. "A boy and a girl. Both mad," she motions, finger to her head. "I worked there for a year. Never got paid. And they didn't even give me food properly. The children beat me and I could not control them. One day the boy bit me," she laughs, wiggling the pinkie, or what remains of it. With her finger bleeding, and the bitten part hanging loose, she was thrown out of the home.

She was rescued by a passer-by and helped with medical treatment. "She was a very nice lady, Mamma Kaabi. She saw me crying on the road and helped me. She then took me to a farm in Kuwait." Aminata worked on the farm along with a few others from Madagascar, Ethiopia and the Philippines. They worked two long shifts every day with a break in between, and given shelter and food, but no salary. Aminata again stresses Mamma Kaabi was a good person and took good care of her – Yes, even if she didn't pay. And yes, even if the hours were long. "The Saudi woman starved me, so Mamma Kaabi was a good woman in comparison," she giggles, with a twinkle in her eyes, "She got me the ticket to come home, and she promised to send money to my husband's account." All these years later that money hasn't been received.

Aminata's ticket was to Conakry, and she stayed in the airport, sleeping 'on the hard floor' for a week, until a compatriot helped her get home. "My children were crying when they saw me. They thought I was dead. They were happy to have me back, but there is no peace at home. My husband is bitter. He lost money."

She is now learning tailoring, and hopes to establish a 'trade' soon, same as her Kadiagu Kamara, a colleague at the DoWAN centre. Kadiagu returned from Kuwait just before the pandemic broke out in 2020. She was promised a job in London to work in a supermarket, which she believed until she saw the document at Conakry airport. Along with 50 other women from Makeni, she ended up in Kuwait.

"Someone took us from the airport, and we went to the agent's office. In a full black building. We got ready, took a shower, and were made to wear a uniform. We were trained in some housekeeping, then stowed away in a secret room in that building. Until I was bought..."

She worked in a 3-storey house with 45 people in it, and she was the only domestic worker. In the office she was told she would receive SLe2 million, but the employer then said she would

get only SLe1.5 million. “They said they won’t give me cash. My boss said he was sending it to Sierra Leone. For a year, I had no communication at all with my family and finally when I did speak to them, my parents said they did not receive any money.” When she refused to work until she was paid, she was threatened with her life, but did receive some salary for the rest of the contract period. When she fell very ill they returned her to the agency office, from where she was sent home, but not before her savings were confiscated.



*Aminata is now learning to sew and hopes to set up her own business, and recoup some of what she lost migrating to Kuwait*

This is more than just a place to learn a skill. It’s where women like Aminata, Kadiagu, Mariamma (trafficked to Oman) and Zenab (to Lebanon) gather, to heal and reconcile, to speak of their experience without being ostracised or criticised. “When I come here, I forget my pain,” laughs Aminata, finding humour that others don’t.

Knowledge of what happens when one embarks on a program or ends up in a Gulf state is quite widespread, there are enough videos on social media and interviews on radios, yet every new candidate is willing to take that journey all over again. Lucy and Mariamma Bundu (another survivor-activist) however have a different take. Sometimes it’s not just about knowing what could happen, but actually having someone intervene and give an

alternative, a hope that things could be different if they stayed back or went through regular means.

“There is a significant level of poverty, they will grab even a small improvement to their current status to go. Even 5% better than what they have here,” says Sr Miriam, echoing what Lucy later elaborates on.

What all of this translates into is victim blaming by the community and officials, and by those with privilege. And those who return and share their stories are accused of being lazy or engaging in prostitution, leading the women to take greater risks and go into hiding to dodge the stigma.

“Officials are like, ‘Why are you so stupid? Why would sell everything for something just a little better?’ So there is also a general sense of ‘you got yourself here, why should we be helping you... you got on the plane, or you got on the boat, or you walked here. Or you got in the taxi, nobody forced you, you chose to do this’” says Sr Miriam, of the officials’ disdain for the plight of those who are trafficked.

What is not understood is that there is emotional manipulation, and that trafficking is not just about shoving someone into a van and kidnapping them. It’s a complex system and officials are uneducated about that, she says. Most people interviewed say the migration to the GCC is mainly women in the 19-35 age group. The ones leaving immediately after high school, or leaving after having children to support the growing burden of running a family. The younger candidates are the ones being lured on social media by designer bags and fancy lifestyles being peddled by the ‘facilitators’.

*“OFFICIALS ARE LIKE, ‘WHY ARE YOU SO STUPID? WHY WOULD SELL EVERYTHING FOR SOMETHING JUST A LITTLE BETTER?’ SO THERE IS ALSO A GENERAL SENSE OF ‘YOU GOT YOURSELF HERE, WHY SHOULD WE BE HELPING YOU... YOU GOT ON THE PLANE, OR YOU GOT ON THE BOAT, OR YOU WALKED HERE. OR YOU GOT IN THE TAXI, NOBODY FORCED YOU, YOU CHOSE TO DO THIS.’”*

Joseph Turay, the acting deputy director for the north, Ministry of Social Welfare, says it is not easy taking on the convincing power of the traffickers. He says those being smuggled – he makes a distinction of those who have agreed to be transported albeit on a false promise – are also being trafficked. Whatever be the terminology used, there has been an increase in those going abroad without understanding what may befall them. “In Sierra Leone in particular it is very rare for a girl to be self-reliant financially. This yearning is what traffickers use.”

Joseph’s office is a short distance from the Makeni market area, which is a beehive of

activity not limited to trading goods. It's where candidates are identified to market a program to, it is also where activists like Lucy and Bundu spread awareness on trafficking. The official depends quite a lot on these women to not only keep abreast of trends in trafficking, but also to intervene in managing cases.

"Poverty is the most repeated reason for women to take these risks, and extreme poverty is a reality, but it also raises the question if you manage to raise the money to pay for a trafficker, then why not use it for something else here, like use it for capital for a business?" he ponders.

He accepts that the traffickers are convincing enough to sell a dream far beyond what that program fee can earn. His office has to contend with the victims of trafficking on their return, and there are challenges that the government cannot respond to, but organisations like that of Lucy or Bundu would have to step in. "They encountered a whole lot of stigma, a lot of marginalisation from their families, you know, from their communities... they need support. And for us as a ministry, we do not have the wherewithal to respond to all of those challenges. Our funding is very low from the national government. It does not come on time. And for now, we do not have many partners working on trafficking."

*"BEFORE THE WAR THEY WENT NOWHERE, DURING THE WAR ONLY REGIONALLY. NOW, THEY ARE GOING FAR... THEY SEE NO HOPE HERE."*

## **Desperation of the post-war generation**

Janet Nickel, another member of WHI team, has been living and working in Sierra Leone since the end of the war two decades ago. Sierra Leoneans are very trusting, and would even give their money to someone else for safekeeping with no assurance, she says, which probably explains the rampant skulduggery that takes place in the name of work and opportunities. She adds that there has been a longstanding practice of the well-heeled Lebanese diaspora in the country recruiting Sierra Leoneans to work for their families and friends in Lebanon. "The deal is you take my daughter to Lebanon and give me a bag of rice. Even here Lebanese employers treat local domestic workers badly. Some are now also recruiting for businesses in other parts of the Arab world."

Lucy recalls another case of a Lebanese resident in Freetown who frequently takes Sierra Leoneans abroad, and one of them died recently, yet no action was taken against the person. "The story was so sad...how the girl died. They took her to work. Just after two months, she got sick. Then they discover that they are not giving her food, they are not providing anything for her. And when the husband said you are not providing for my wife, they said they are not a restaurant! They only give her one slice of bread a day. They also

asked the husband to send medicines from here. They have influence and power, and we don't have the money to get a lawyer. Then, if you go to the police, I don't have the money, but they do, and the police will listen to them. The Lebanese lady continues to take girls from here. Continues to traffic them.”

Janet recounts a recent incident involving her housekeeper's 22-year-old daughter. “She finished her marketing certificate and wanted to go abroad. She had got her passport done, her medical, and was waiting for a ticket. A Lebanese resident of Freetown was recruiting nurses, caterers, and waiters to Qatar. She had no experience in this but was still offered a job. When they were taken for interviews, one hijabi candidate was taken aside and told this was not what good Muslim girls do, and not to go. That was a red flag that she recognised and dropped her plan. Before the war they went nowhere, during the war only regionally. Now, they are going far... they see no hope here.”

“The postwar generation of young people are the abandoned generation. This is manifested in a number of ways. In the lack of inclusion in successive government policies, in the issues that have to do with socio-economic and national development. A lot of these youngsters feel disconnected,” according to Makmid Kamara, former director of the Africa Transitional Justice Legacy Fund (ATJLF). While based in Accra, the Sierra Leonean national is intimately invested in the issues on the ground. The mantra of the post-war years was to forgive and forget, but that translated into also forgetting about the war, he says.

“Subconsciously or consciously we seem to have forgotten the generation that came out of the war. Their parents experienced war differently. But if you don't look back and reflect you can't move forward. Most people don't know the damage done to the societal fabric. That mantra (forgive and forget) is a good one, but it actually has been counterproductive in some ways – forgetting the root causes, forgetting those who emerged from the conflict, forgetting how to prevent them from regressing or going back to war.”

The post-war generation had to deal with more than just poverty or lack of opportunities. “We (ATJLF) worked with amputees from the war, who have now been forced into begging. They may have received some financial compensation, but that's not what they need or want. Their children need to see a different future and need to be supported. But successive governments seem to have forgotten about them, and they probably feel they've got reparation they should move on. The offspring forgotten by society also tend to be ripe targets for traffickers and smugglers, there is a growing influence of the jihadists too in the West African region including Sierra Leone. At the moment we are talking about trafficking.” Makmid fears that this is just the start.

“There is huge disaffection and disconnect. The dividends of democracy are not being felt by the young generation; there is an apathy towards politics and development

processes. They don't think there's an enabling environment and would rather look for the immediate gratification that going abroad offers."

"Governments need to go beyond rhetorics. Meaningful engagement with young people, especially women is the need of the hour. The current government is very young and diverse, and they understand this, so there's an opportunity. We need to see if they transform their understanding to action."

*"SUBCONSCIOUSLY OR CONSCIOUSLY WE SEEM TO HAVE FORGOTTEN THE GENERATION THAT CAME OUT OF THE WAR. THEIR PARENTS EXPERIENCED WAR DIFFERENTLY. BUT IF YOU DON'T LOOK BACK AND REFLECT YOU CAN'T MOVE FORWARD. MOST PEOPLE DON'T KNOW THE DAMAGE DONE TO THE SOCIETAL FABRIC."*

Pastor Sidikie, who runs a shelter out of a multi-use three-storey building in Freetown, bemoans the lack of sensitisation and proactivity in the country. "Like malaria, always giving medicines but not preventing infection. Same with trafficking. We need to use TV and radio better, use survivors and returnees to tell their stories." A row of rooms dot a narrow verandah, and on one end of the second floor is his family home. He has been receiving returnees, mainly from Oman. "Someone based in Oman does some underground work and lobbies for them. When too many cases were coming in I decided to rent a property here to provide shelter. I have received 110 women over two years and given them trauma counselling."

They [may have hoped Oman was only a transit point](#) but their desire was to go somewhere else, he feels. The Oman returnees are between 20 to 24 years of age. Many of the women trafficked have parents who lost property during the war, and are still traumatised. So the children try to make amends, to make money, he says. "Agents are selling a destination more than a job. Dubai! Latest, the agents have a program for Turkey. Now they think they can go to Turkey and hope to jump over to Europe/Germany."

On Sierra Leone signing a bilateral agreement with Saudi, he feels it may make things better. Bundu agrees it may ultimately be beneficial, but until it is executed, it's another tool in the traffickers' arsenal undoing the work of the activists. "They say, see, the government wants you to go abroad, so there is no problem with our program."

Sidikie says, "There is a strong network of agents – about 300-400 of them but it is hard to trace them; and they demand on an average US\$1300. In my experience, only 2% of the women they send out manage decent work. The ones who are ashamed to come back overstay and can't afford the fees and fines that they accumulate; they are no longer with their boss and go into prostitution." Of the last allegation, he has no concrete proof, but says it's what he sees and hears.

Particularly critical of Sierra Leone’s secret societies (see sidebar), he says “None of them take this on and speak of it. So not only are the young being trafficked, when they return there is a huge stigma that persists.” Therefore, when returnees do want to go home, they do so in the stealth of the night, so neighbours don’t see them return with a failed story. Then there are some who choose to share their ordeals and create a ruckus in the face of threats and ostracisation. Women like Mariamma Bundu and Lucy Turay.

### **Power of the Societies**

The Poro and Bondo/Sande secret societies for men and women respectively are [centres of power](#) in Sierra Leone, and those aspiring for any kind of political or socio-economic influence must be initiated into these societies. The members wield political power, and are responsible for decisions that affect the country as a whole. The Poro society is the more powerful of the two and [plays a part in enforcing social norms, socialising the young through initiation schools.](#)

### **Sierra Leone Labour Migration Policy 2022**

The Sierra Leone Labour Migration Policy 2022 recognises that there is huge concern around “semi-legal or outright criminal recruiters, often linked to smuggling or trafficking networks.” The policy states that the unregulated agencies take workers to Asia via fraudulent means, leaving them stranded in the Middle East. “The risks and dangers associated with the recruitment through private agencies and informal networks include paying of exorbitant fees, debt bondage, producing of fake visas, seizing of travel documents, dishonesty with regard to the nature and conditions of employment, unsecure contracts and trafficking in person.”

The policy also acknowledges the state’s inability to regulate these agencies, that leaves its citizens in a “considerably vulnerable situation.”

*Other key assessments include:*

- Research has shown that where channels for legal migration are limited, migrant workers tend to depend on illegitimate recruiters or their own social networks.
- There is enough evidence to suggest that the rights of some Sierra Leonean emigrants and potential emigrants are increasingly abused by their recruiters and employers. Migrant workers from Sierra Leone face different challenges at different stages of migration, namely pre-departure (from decision-making to preparation for migration); in-service (workers in employment at the destination) and return and reintegration. As a result of the lack of reliable information about migrating for employment, some low-skilled migrants tend to take the decision to migrate without considering its adverse implications for personal and family interests. Migrants and potential migrants are also exploited and abused during the recruitment process which usually takes place through private recruitment agencies and informal networks.

The total annual remittance transferred to Sierra Leone is around [US\$168] million which represents about 12% of GDP. The true size of remittances, including unrecorded flows through formal and informal channels to Sierra Leone, is therefore considerable.



## **PART 2** | STORIES OF ORIGIN, SIERRA LEONE

# Battered not beaten, Sierra Leonean women pick up the cudgels

Electric shocks and starvation fuel the activism of trafficking victims

Just because they share their story does not mean they trust you. Even as those who returned after being trafficked share parts of their journey, they are wary of the listener's intent. Yet, they stay and speak, and over the months they develop a level of trust with some of their compatriots and see themselves as a catalyst for change – someone who can prevent what happened to them from happening to another. Mariamma Bundu works with those who have been trafficked, helping them move from trauma to trust to advocacy.

Bundu's office-cum-living space is in the border town of Kambia, a short distance from Guinea. Her organisation, Women and Girl Child Against Irregular Migration (WAG-CAIM), is



strategically located, but the area carries distant memories of a simpler and more hopeful period of her life. Adjacent to the office is the Maria Hotel, on the banks of the Kolente River. She worked as a manager at the hotel for many years until she was tempted into a program – a job offer in Australia.



*Mariamma Bundu outside her office*

On the day of the interview, there is a lot of activity around her office. Bundu and her team are involved in democracy and election awareness as the country geared up for its general elections. She strides around, an instruction here, a suggestion there, before she sits down to talk about her journey to Kuwait. The room clears out without her request, and the tears flow non-stop – but with every line she utters, the tears take on a different character. Anger, frustration, grief, fear... but at no point does she care to evoke pity for her situation. Trafficked, abused at work, imprisoned and then called crazy, she has seen and experienced more in the last five years than many would in a lifetime.

In 2015, she managed to scrape together US\$1500 for the job in Australia. But when she reached the airport in Conakry, Guinea, she was given documents in a language she did not recognise. She was headed to Kuwait, and she had no choice but to make a go for it.

When she landed in Kuwait, her passport, along with all her stuff, including her phone, was taken away. She was put to work she had not signed up for and made to sleep in the bathroom. “When I demanded they return my passport, they said they buy me, and I had to just work.” Bundu ran away but the agency “sold her to one house and another,” she says. At the end of four months of working in different homes but never being paid, she made one last-ditch attempt to escape. “My madam’s brother was a soldier, and he threatened me with a pistol and wanted to rape me. I left everything and ran, and managed to get into the government shelter.”

The shelter (run by Kuwait’s Public Authority for Manpower in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh) was a brief reprieve, “a privilege,” she says. Bundu received food and a place to sleep. “But I was not being released. I was stuck there. So I started my advocacy from within. I borrowed another person’s phone and started communicating with a radio station in Sierra Leone telling them about the plight of my sisters in Kuwait, demanding the government help us. There were more than 200 of us there at the end of 2015 and early 2016.”

*WITH EVERY LINE SHE UTTERS, THE TEARS TAKE ON A DIFFERENT CHARACTER. ANGER, FRUSTRATION, GRIEF, FEAR... BUT AT NO POINT DOES SHE CARE TO EVOKE PITY FOR HER SITUATION. TRAFFICKED, ABUSED AT WORK, IMPRISONED AND THEN CALLED CRAZY, SHE HAS SEEN AND EXPERIENCED MORE IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS THAN MANY WOULD IN A LIFETIME.*

## **The heavy hand of law enforcement in Kuwait**

The attention she drew to herself and her situation had dire consequences. “I was taken from the shelter and put in a prison. I did not even know what I did wrong. They only told me I had committed a crime. What crime? They had no answer. Only one time the embassy official visited me. One time there was a court hearing.”

In recounting her prison experience she relives the worst phase of her life, but refuses to end the interview. “There was no food, no water. If you bleed, it would just flow, then be punished for messing up. We were made to work, wash vehicles, to even earn the water to drink. Worst was the current. They gave us shocks.”

She was moved around to eight different prison locations and in two of those places she received electric shock treatment, Bundu says. “There was a wall that we were forced to touch, and upon contact, we would receive shock waves throughout our body. That was our punishment for crying or shouting. Their way to control us.”

In these cramped prisons, 50 to a small room, there were Ethiopians, Filipinos, Ghanaians, Indians and many other nationalities, and most of them did not know why they were imprisoned and were only told “you have a crime. Be here, die here.”

She repeats that the shelter, where she spent the first few months after escaping her workplace, was a privilege. Bundu recalls her story in no particular chronology, often linking a certain emotion and experience to different periods of her ordeal. “In Kuwait, you will see different people sitting there and crying,” – ‘there’ is the airport arrival and departure halls, the streets, the shelter, the prisons, the agency office. She spent half of her three-year stint in Kuwait in different prisons, another six months in the shelter, and her longest stay was at the deportation centre for eight months. All because of the abuse she endured during the four months she worked, and finding no justice when she sought it.

She carried her anger and indignation back to Sierra Leone, fuelling the course of her work. “I started my advocacy at the Lungi airport. I was scared to go home, but I was also seeing girls going from there. I was telling everyone there ‘don’t go to the Gulf,’ and people thought I was crazy. But we are sisters with the same struggle, I can’t give up.”

Now, a few years later, her advocacy is more strategic and better-planned. She and her team go to schools and marketplaces in different towns, sharing their experiences, and educating young women. A commonality and solidarity she shares with Lucy.

She points in the northwest direction of her office, “It is easy to cross the Guinea border, just 10–15 minutes from here, but it’s difficult to stop them, especially at the border when they are so close to leaving. So I have learnt to speak to them in a way that they see reason.”

Every day Bundu opens the raw, never-healing wound by making herself vulnerable and sharing her experiences, so that she can break some cycles of exploitation at least. “The traffickers use bikes. They will ride the bikes, the women will sit behind. And they will dress locally, not like they are going to travel... who will know they are trafficking you?”



*The point of no return. Once victims of trafficking cross this point, there's little local officials and activists can do.*

She intervenes at this point. “I will call my sister – ‘come, where are you going?’ and with that a conversation begins.” It also places Bundu in the crosshairs of the traffickers. “They have broken into my office once and destroyed everything. The last time when I was at the marketplace I heard them enquiring about me. Who I was.”

Corruption is rife, and some law enforcement officials are often on the take of the traffickers, to pretend ignorance when it is obvious women are being trafficked, according to both Lucy and Bundu. And as if to prove this, there are check posts every kilometre or so, and the cops are not subtle about asking for money.

*“THERE WAS A WALL THAT WE WERE FORCED TO TOUCH, AND UPON CONTACT WE WOULD RECEIVE SHOCK WAVES THROUGHOUT OUR BODY. THAT WAS OUR PUNISHMENT FOR CRYING OR SHOUTING. THEIR WAY TO CONTROL US.”*

Bundu understands the frustration of those who return, already battered and disillusioned, more impoverished than before, since they don’t have a vocation or support system to earn a living, making them vulnerable to another program, to another ill-thought migration.

For instance, in DoWAN, close to 100 women – victims of trafficking – have (and continue to) benefit from these facilities. The women are now the storytellers and peer educators, actively advocating against trafficking. To turn the narrative of poverty and desperation into one of resilience and recuperation. But it is not a foolproof exercise.

“Jennifer worked with us on educating people, and one day she herself fell into the trap and ended up in Oman. She started calling me and wanted to come back. She was lucky, and we managed, but it’s very difficult to bring them back,” says Lucy Turay.

Lucy spent 18 months in Lebanon, returning to Sierra Leone in mid-2020. In the last five years, she has packed in more than a lifetime of work. Lucy speaks with urgency, her words tripping over each other as she finds new ways to unpack and reflect on her own experiences and those of the women she works with.

Lucy was the only educated person in her family and worked as a teacher. She was approached by a smuggler through her aunt and was offered a job as a governess for a family in Lebanon, with a salary of US\$500 at the start and then US\$1000. “That was a lot of money for us. I was super, super excited. I had a 3-year-old son and my baby girl was just three months old. I left her with my auntie here. My husband had a job then, and we could manage the US\$400 to pay the man.”

The whole process of her migration was smooth — a little too smooth, she recalls.

“Ok, there is a connection between the police and the immigration because when you go to take your passport, they are supposed to interview you but because they (traffickers) have special people that are working for them in the immigration, they will just call them and say you have this person is coming, and she is my passenger. The same will happen at every step of the process. For the medical. For travel clearance. At the border. The smuggler will just say this is my passenger, and the officials are getting a percentage. And the same thing is happening with the police. Everyone is involved in trafficking.”

Her ordeal in Lebanon is similar to that of thousands of others across the region. How she acted on it was life-changing for her and many others. “The auntie died and I was devastated. I had to come back home for my baby. But I was not allowed to. So I start my fight.” [The story of Lucy’s activism](#) in Lebanon is widely reported, including her vocal disapproval of the Sierra Leonean consul general in Beirut who was ineffective in his role, campaigning for the repatriation of her compatriots, running a shelter, and the song she penned and performed that caught the attention of many, including her country’s president. During his state visit to Lebanon, she managed to gain an audience with him and advocated for the repatriation of close to 200 stranded women during the peak of the pandemic.

When her song was released, thanks to the help of a French journalist and now close friend, donations started pouring in. “With a lot of attention came a lot of donations. I am poor in my country. But I think we should use this money and set up a home so that we can take care of other people because I know what it means to be in the streets. I spent four days in the streets in extreme cold in Lebanon. I think I might lose my life. I must not say anything about street life because every time I think about it, I will be so much in pain.” Lucy states everything in the present tense as if it were happening in the now, and unlike Bundu whose tears expressed a plethora of emotions, Lucy’s grit and grief are in the way her eyes glaze over, distancing herself from the memories she recalls.

The temporary home in Lebanon germinated into DoWAN. Off the Makeni highway is a modest building with four rooms of different sizes, and a wood fire kitchen in the outhouse. This is the centre that provides a safe space for many women victims/survivors of trafficking – and the transition from victim to survivor is rarely linear. Often, those who have been trafficked identify as both. There are some still healing, some still in a catatonic stage, and some who have healed enough to be peer educators. Earning the trust of victims/survivors is not easy, as they have been let down by those closest to them. It’s even more difficult working with men. “They don’t ask for help. The way they respond is through substance abuse, like alcoholism, drugs or whatever or violence on their intimate partners. Here in Sierra Leone, if you go to a therapist and explain, maybe the family member will start to say you are crazy. And that is a very, very big stigma now to make even if you are saying something important they won’t listen. I will not say I’m going for a mental health session. I would say like I’m going for a meeting...”

The centre offers various skills training – computers, cooking, tailoring, beadwork, and most importantly, it offers succour for those still traumatised by their experiences abroad. While all of this is Lucy’s vision, her passion project is the farm. It’s both her therapy and her escape. The 33-year-old – Mamma Lucy to the old and the young – has dizzying levels of energy. One moment she is checking on her primary-school-aged children, the next she is checking on the provisions in the pantry for the innumerable people who drop in. The centre is now a place not just for returnees but those who are seeking a sliver of hope and have no one else to turn to.

Lucy struggles with various triggers. She had started helping people when she was still traumatised herself. “You listen to five stories, but for those five people it’s one story. I suffer from five different triggers. This is why I love working on the farm. It’s my escape. I recognise I am still a victim...”



*Lucy explains the lay of the land and the yield of different crops*

As a victim/survivor, Lucy recognises the reasons trafficking is rife, but she still sees opportunities for employment and sustainability. “Just after the war, there was no mechanism in place for reparations, therapy, and you see that manifest in the society still.”

Astute in her observations, she feels providing easy access to education and means to deal with hunger would go a long way in getting to the root of the trafficking problem.

She takes the village of Mabrie – not too far from her centre and home in Makeni – as a case study. “There is no school within the village. The children have to walk 10 km each way to reach the school on the main road. So the younger ones do not go to school, and by the time they are old enough to make the journey by themselves they have already fallen behind irreparably.” Families that still wish to educate their children then send them away to the cities and towns, to relatives, so the children can study there. That is where the child trafficking happens; children being pushed into begging after being crippled, and for child labour, says Lucy. Often parents who have paid to send their children to relatives have no idea.

“And even if they do, they don’t take action. There is polygamy, men have 5–6 wives and so many children they cannot take care of them all. Maybe some of them will give birth to 15 children, 10 children, 12 children... So the responsibility is too much that they cannot provide for them. If the children run away from those who are abusing them or the traffickers, and go back to their families, the family will send them back for a bag of rice as compensation. Since it’s usually families involved, even if the case goes to court, it will be dropped without any further consideration.” The nexus between law enforcement and traffickers seems unimpeachable. Lucy is aware of the risks of taking on the powers that be. “I constantly worry for my safety and that of my babies.” That fear instead of crippling her efforts provides her with more ideas, like the Mothers’ Club (see below).

“So most of these children that are brought to town are not going to school and are forced into working in the market – they will sell under the sun the whole day and won’t even earn \$10. These are the people who will then be targeted to go abroad.”

Mabrie, the village that Lucy has adopted so to speak, had lost a few dozen lives to both the Ebola and Cholera outbreak. Sanitation is a huge issue, as is access to decent schooling. She has now undertaken providing latrine facilities, and pushing for the government to start a school closer to the village. There are over 1,000 residents in this village, and, if Lucy has her way, she hopes to extend the model to other villages and other regions.

There is a huge stigma around returning empty-handed, and so the girls end up re-trafficked with the hope of earning something to pay off existing loans. The vicious cycle is never-ending. “Even the police threaten us at times, especially when you are pushing for a prosecution. You will get a call from an official asking you to drop the case or be ready to take them on. Like today, when we were on the highway, we saw the police asking us for money. What’s to stop them from doing the same with traffickers? They can take money from everyone. Not only the traffickers, it’s very, very easy.”

*“YOU LISTEN TO FIVE STORIES, BUT FOR THOSE FIVE PEOPLE IT’S ONE STORY. I SUFFER FROM FIVE DIFFERENT TRIGGERS. THIS IS WHY I LOVE WORKING ON THE FARM. IT’S MY ESCAPE. I RECOGNISE I AM STILL A VICTIM...”*

## **A seed, a sprout, and a way out of abject poverty**

But at the bottom of all of this is the most fundamental problem, hunger. “You see in Sierra Leone, for 70% of the population to have daily bread is a very big problem. They are earning like \$60 a month, but a bag of rice can cost \$40... You see, they are living in such poverty, they will do anything for that one meal. They are desperate and will allow their children to take risky decisions. A lot of people are starving. So if someone comes and says you will earn \$200, and with \$200 we do a lot in Sierra Leone, then the family will just say like maybe that child will be sacrificed, ok... but if she doesn’t die we will all survive. This is why we target the women, the Mothers’ Club, because the children will listen to them. We discuss a lot of things in the club, the problems of trafficking, hunger, and how to gain employment. Many of these women are victims of trafficking themselves.”

The Mabrie village is off the Makeni highway. Before you enter the village is the Bondo female secret society’s hut, and the forbidden forest for the Poro male secret society. These are the places where members are initiated into the societies. There is a certain sacredness to how these places are referred to, indicating the power the societies hold. The Mothers’ Club meetings are diametrically opposite in their position and are held in the middle of the village in a square building that has a parapet and a roof. The women and children gather here regularly. On the day Lucy gives a tour of the farm and the village, the members and their families are out in full strength. There is music and dance traditional to the Bondo society.



*Members of the Mothers’ Club working together after the harvest*



“We supported them (the Mothers’ Club) with seedlings, and they supported us with the land. Over the last couple of years, we managed to cover over 100 acres of land – community land owned by the village. Land that was always used for agricultural purposes but not efficiently as the villagers did not receive any support. Now we have shown them it can not only be sustainable but also profitable. Providing food for those families is of course the priority.” The profits are invested back in the land, to support women who were victims of or who could fall prey to trafficking.

The first set of 17 bushels of seedlings for rice were bought with the donations Lucy received at the start of her advocacy. Currently, they have loaned out 80 bushels and have 100 more in storage. But they still depend on rented tractors and crushers. The land is used primarily to grow rice, and also cassava, potato, and vegetables, with the women selling the produce in the market themselves. As Lucy explains the cycles of farming, there is a steady stream of men and women with tools walking past to their own land that lies beyond. Seeing the success of the Mother’s Club, others in the area are mimicking their methods, much to Lucy’s glee.

“Topia Mamma Lucy,” they enquire after her well-being. Lucy responds quickly to each of them – ‘Topia Fatmata’ ‘Topia Sama’ – but is careful not to get into a conversation. “Who has the time for long chats,” she laughs. “They see us, who have returned from the Middle East, working in the farms, making money, it motivates others to do the same, even if it’s not with us.”

Apart from loaning seedlings interest-free, the Mothers also receive support for healthcare for their children, as the facilities in the village are lacking. The village is a hive of activity. The latrines are being built with local labour; in another spot palm nuts are being prepared to extract oil, and in yet another spot, the oil is being churned manually. Her greatest success is that since undertaking the farming activity, hunger has come down significantly in the community. An autodidact when it comes to agriculture, Lucy says “So when I have a passion for something, I start asking people. I go the extra mile to know about it.”

The farm and the DoWAN centre in Makeni are an extension of each other. The women move with ease from learning a skill at the centre to working in the land when the season demands it. Her big goal for this year is to have the farm fully support her organisation, to be self-sustained in every way. “I will make profits from the farm and I will use this profit to sponsor the organisation.”

Even as Lucy harnesses the power of women in the community, Makmid Kamara (ATJLF) commenting on women and their vulnerability to be trafficked, says while the feminist movement and Sierra Leonean women have been quite vocal and made tremendous contributions to post-war processes, they still hold little power. “It is one thing to be vocal

and advocate for their rights. The challenge, however, is whether they are being listened to and respected. Policy-wise, there has been some progress, but when it comes to safety and dignity at the community level there's much more to do.”



*The Mothers' Club performing in the village square*

*“SO LET’S FORGET ABOUT THE SMALLER THINGS – LIKE ‘BLACK MONKEYS’, ‘YOU SMELL BAD’, ‘YOU ARE NOT A HUMAN BEING’, WHEN THEY CUT YOUR HAIR AND MAKE YOU USE SEPARATE UTENSILS...ALL THESE THINGS AFFECT THE DOMESTIC WORKERS MENTALLY BUT ARE NOT CONSIDERED IMPORTANT. NOBODY TALKS ABOUT THESE ‘SMALLER’ THINGS. EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT THE BIGGER THINGS. WHAT PEOPLE DON’T UNDERSTAND IS THAT THERE IS A LINK BETWEEN THOSE STEREOTYPICAL VERBAL ABUSE AND HOW THE TRAFFICKED ARE VIEWED.”*

### **The stereotypes that criminalise victims of trafficking**

Understanding the racial hierarchies and discrimination that plague migrant workers in the Gulf is critical to strengthening their protections and weakening the grip traffickers have over the vulnerable. Lucy believes the vulnerabilities are largely due to stereotypes that have little or no truth to them, but are so firmly entrenched no one questions it. This results in anti-trafficking policies and measures reiterating a narrative that is not fully true.

“So let’s forget about the smaller things like the words that they [employers] use – like ‘black monkeys’, ‘you smell bad’, ‘you are not a human being’, when they cut your hair and make you use separate utensils... All these things affect the domestic workers mentally but are not considered important. Nobody talks about these ‘smaller’ things. Everyone is talking about the bigger things. What people don’t understand is that there is a link between those stereotypical verbal abuse and how the trafficked are viewed.”

It then becomes easy to mount onto these smaller abuses larger accusations. The vulnerable migrant then becomes a mule and a victim, as they need the money and their passports are with the sponsor or agent or trafficker.

“Like people are talking about African domestic workers doing prostitution. Or that Africans are drug dealers. These are not serious issues in our country. Nobody knows how to make drugs here. It’s being made and consumed in developed countries. But when the law catches [up with] them, no one goes after the ‘owner’, the person that owns the drugs. They will only see the migrant worker as a drug dealer or a prostitute,” Lucy explains.

Bandana Pattanaik, co-ordinator of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), says this is forced criminality and that possible cases of ‘forced criminality’ require sensitivity and care. “People forced into situations on false promises may also be forced into undertaking criminal activities to survive. Now do you see them as a criminal or as a victim of trafficking?”

“Some people are asked more questions at immigration checkpoints than others based not only on their nationalities but also on their skin colour, on how they are dressed, on their gender, and age, etc. Police raids are routinely carried out in areas where poor immigrants live. Even among poor immigrants, some groups are stereotyped as more likely to be criminals than others.”

Speaking on international standards and practices, Pattanaik says [the Palermo Protocol](#) (the Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime) does not explicitly mention forced criminality and the principle of non-punishment that should be applied while dealing with forced criminals. “But these issues have been discussed in detail in many research reports in the last decade. The Working Group to the Conference of State Parties (to the UNTOC) has advised in 2009 and 2010 that [trafficking for forced criminality should be recognised and the principle of non-punishment should be applied](#). Various law enforcement agencies, including the INTERPOL have noted the phenomenon of forced criminality.”

Though anti-trafficking discourse and policies are increasingly including victims and survivors, Lucy does not have much faith in the process. “I feel like they only go there to take the interview – How do you go, how do you come?”

The minutiae that make up the real story are missed. “They want to know about rape and physical abuse. Equally important is the daily trauma. The children spitting on me. The madam calling me a monkey... to be dehumanised daily. Like if my dad gave me a cup of water and said this is a punishment, you won’t take it as a punishment. But when you have to hold that cup for hours and hours, the stress and pressure on your arm turns it into a brutal punishment. Same with those ‘small’ inhumanities. It paralyses you. Your brain stops working.”