

A large, solid yellow map of Sierra Leone is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the cover. The map is centered on the country's outline, and the text 'SIERRA LEONE' is printed in a bold, teal, sans-serif font across its middle.

**SIERRA  
LEONE**

# **FROM FALSE PROMISES TO FORCED LABOUR:**

**THE JOURNEY OF  
MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS FROM  
SIERRA LEONE TO LEBANON**

A smaller, solid yellow map of Lebanon is located in the bottom right corner of the cover. The map is centered on the country's outline, and the text 'LEBANON' is printed in a bold, teal, sans-serif font across its middle.

**LEBANON**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

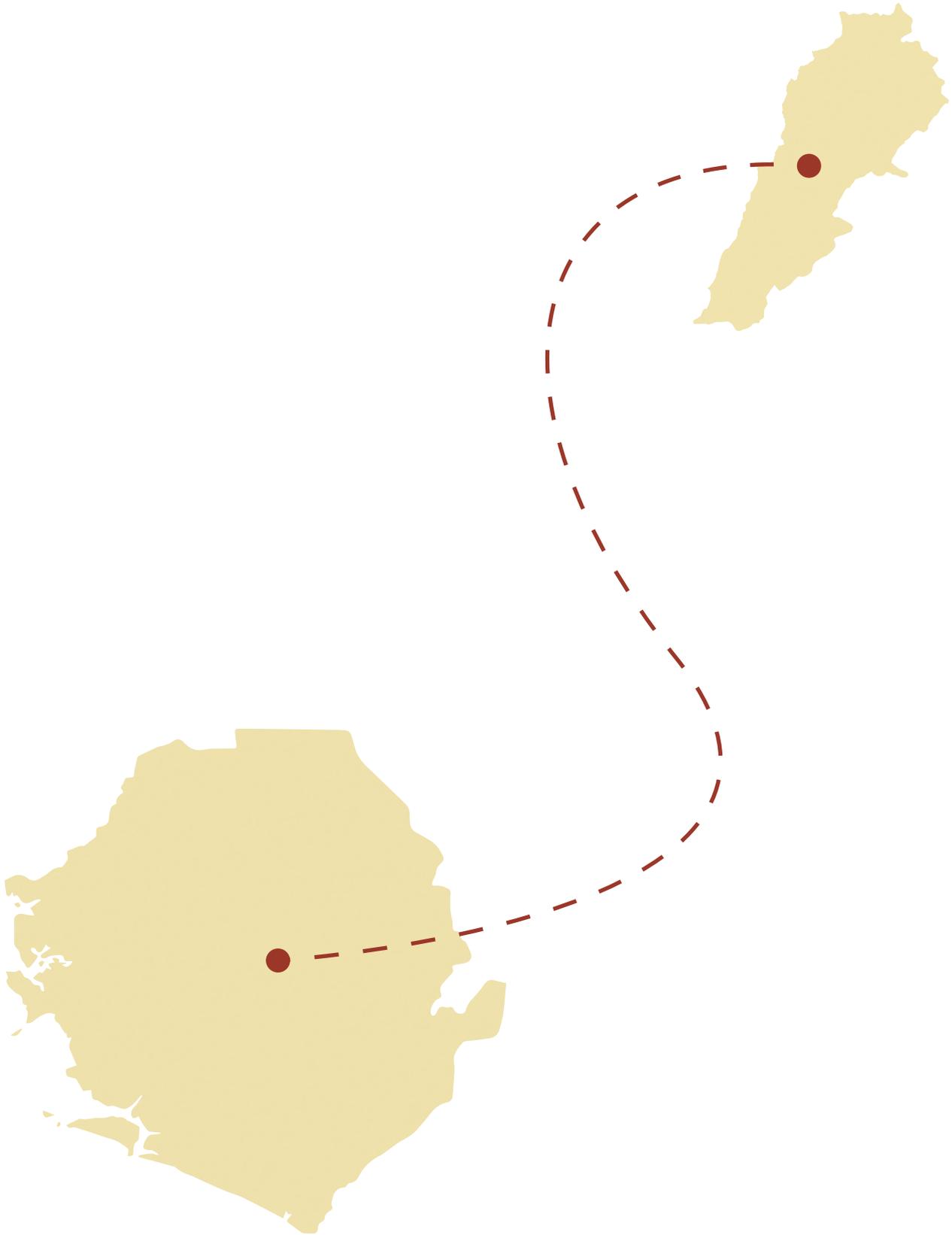
Migrant Workers' Action (MWA) would like to thank all survivors of the Kafala system who agreed to share their story and detailed testimonies to shed light on the journey of exploitation and abuse they were subjected to. MWA would like to extend a special thanks to our partner organisation Domestic Workers Advocacy Network (DoWAN)<sup>1</sup> and World Hope International<sup>2</sup> for facilitating access to returnee migrant domestic workers. Data collection and analysis were carried out by Migrant-Rights.Org<sup>3</sup> on behalf of MWA .

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1 <https://dowanunite.com/>

2 <https://worldhope.org>

3 <https://www.migrant-rights.org/>



**FROM FALSE PROMISES TO FORCED LABOUR:**  
The Journey of Migrant Domestic Workers from  
Sierra Leone to Lebanon

*“They were treating us like slaves. If my madam wants to go out, she will close the door from the outside, go. When she came back, she will open the door. I am not allowed to go outside. I am not allowed to take care of myself. I am not allowed to speak to family. I can’t eat what I want.”*



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# INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone has for decades had one of the lowest UN Human Development Index, with alarming social indicators. Well over half of its population lives in poverty, and according to the government's estimate, at least 10% of the population live with diverse forms of social and economic vulnerabilities.<sup>1</sup> The country was one of the epicentres of the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2015, and survivors have no access to psychosocial support, continuous medical observation, or other special needs. Prior to the Ebola epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic, Sierra Leone had still struggled with the fallout of the civil war that ravaged the West African country between 1993 and 2002. In the Sierra Leone-Lebanon labour migration corridor, wars and their aftermath are a commonality among both Sierra Leonean migrants and their Lebanese employers. The violence experienced seems to have had an impact on both the employer and the worker – the former are those who grew up during Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990), and the latter during Sierra Leone's (1992-2002).

This report, part of MWA's In Focus research series<sup>2</sup>, seeks to understand the environment from which Sierra Leonean women migrate and how the cards are stacked against them even before they leave their country. More importantly, the report aims to shed light on how Lebanon's Kafala system not only exploits those existing vulnerabilities, but aggravates them further by systemic indifference, including non-existent access to justice. Most of those interviewed for this report travelled to Lebanon between 2018 and 2022, while the Arab nation was grappling with its own economic and political crisis. This has significantly impacted migrant domestic workers (MDWs), exacerbating their already vulnerable situation and the precarious conditions under which they live.

## THE KAFALA SYSTEM - A SYSTEM OF EXPLOITATION

The Kafala system that governs the migration, recruitment, and employment of migrant workers is a complex of laws and practices that tie the worker's residence and work permits to the sponsor. In the case of MDWs, the majority of whom are women, the sponsor is an individual employer, the

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<sup>1</sup> Sierra Leone Strategic Plan of Ministry of Social Welfare 2024-28

<sup>2</sup> MWA's In Focus Research series takes an in depth look at the journey of Migrant Domestic Workers from key sending countries to Lebanon. The first of the series focusing on the journey of Kenyan migrant workers can be found at: <https://mwaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/MWA-KenyaReport-231127.pdf>

workplace is a household, and there is no access to the scant protections of the labour law from which domestic workers are excluded.

The Kafala system allows for the proliferation of human rights abuses. It promotes a paternalistic relationship between the sponsor and the worker, giving employers a sense of possession and control over the worker. Employers pay between US\$2000 and US\$3000 as recruitment fees<sup>3</sup> and interpret payment for the services of an individual as a payment for the individual itself. Having paid a rather steep recruitment fee, employers often argue payment of promised salary is optional or flexible, as workers who were interviewed recount.

MDWs who escape abusive households usually do not have their identity papers and find themselves classified as irregular migrants subject to arrest, detention, and deportation as the Kafala system forbids them from leaving their employer without permission. This results in many MDWs being treated as criminals rather than as victims. Employers can submit a complaint to General Security if the worker has left during their contract period, and General Security will cancel the worker's permit based on a number of possible residency offences, such as changing the nature of one's job or moving to another employer before having obtained prior approval from the Ministry of Labour. This practice puts many MDWs at risk for detention and deportation.<sup>4</sup>

A number of human rights bodies have highlighted the concerns related to the Kafala system. Although often perceived or presented as a labour migration pathway, the Kafala system facilitates a form of state-backed forced labour, with many migrant workers ending up in situations where they were trafficked. For example, in 2021, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination raised concerns about the continued discrimination and violence permitted under the Kafala system in Lebanon towards migrant domestic workers. It noted: "The Kafala system was a source of discrimination and violence, and it must be abolished."<sup>5</sup> Earlier in 2011, the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery carried out a visit to Lebanon and noted the increasing reports of domestic servitude. More recently, following a country visit, the UN Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights also called for the abolition of the Kafala system in Lebanon.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on testimonies of workers who say that's what is demanded of them as recompensation when they break contract.

<sup>4</sup> ILO, Lebanon: Regulatory Framework Governing Migrant Workers, available at: Lebanon: [Regulatory framework governing migrant workers | International Labour Organization](#)

<sup>5</sup> ILO, Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Lebanon and what employers can do about it, available at: [ILO in Lebanon issues guidance to families and other employers of migrant workers in light of COVID-19 | International Labour Organization](#)

Despite a persisting economic crisis and rising geopolitical tensions, migrant workers from Sierra Leone and other countries continue to arrive in the hopes of a better life. Yet, as this report will demonstrate, structural vulnerabilities in Sierra Leone contribute to heightening the risk of exploitation by deceptive recruiters, and the Kafala System provides a framework that allows for widespread abuses, including forced labour.

The findings of this report establish that by both international and national standards, all of the women interviewed were victims of forced labour, to a large degree enabled by Lebanon's Kafala system, and that many of them were also victims of human trafficking. Lebanon is in grave violation of its international legal obligations by failing to protect migrant domestic workers in the country.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A total of 41 migrant women were interviewed directly – 40 who have returned and 1 still in Lebanon, as well as the families of three migrant women who were still in Lebanon. The foundation of the report is based on the lived experiences of these interviewees. In addition, one recruitment agent was interviewed.

An additional 12 interviews were conducted with various civil society stakeholders and government stakeholders, including the Minister of Social Welfare, the Executive Director of the Anti-Trafficking Department, senior officials in the Ministry of Labour, activists, and advocates.

All of the interviews were conducted 1-1, in the homes of a few and in neutral spaces such as offices of NGOs and village community squares for the majority. The women were interviewed in Freetown, Makeni, and Kambia and hail from the aforementioned places and other far-flung remote areas of Sierra Leone.

MWA chose to carry out the interviews in Sierra Leone to have access to returnees who were working as live-in domestic workers. Many studies carried out in destination countries struggle to access those most vulnerable and isolated.

These interviews do not quantify the precise scale of abuses, but demonstrate a clear pattern of exploitation and abuse at the hands of recruiters and employers.

In addition to interviews, various policy and strategy documents have been reviewed, as well as data from MWA's recent casework in Lebanon in 2023 and 2024.

The report is divided into three main sections, tracing the journey from Sierra Leone to Lebanon and building the narrative on the main forms of abuse and exploitation, rooted in the testimonies of the migrant women themselves.

## INFO BOX 1: THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

As per the International Labour Organisation (ILO)<sup>1</sup> the 11 key indicators of forced labour are as follows:

- Abuse of vulnerability
- Deception
- Restriction of movement
- Isolation
- Physical and sexual violence
- Intimidation and threats
- Retention of identity documents
- Withholding of wages
- Debt bondage
- Abusive working and living conditions
- Excessive overtime

In some cases, even the presence of one indicator is evidence of forced labour, but in general, the presence of several of these indicators is required to prove forced labour.

In Sierra Leone's Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act of 2022<sup>2</sup>, some of the elements of exploitation are:

- (a) keeping a person in a state of slavery;
- (b) subjecting a person to practices similar to slavery;
- (c) compelling or causing a person to provide forced labour or services;
- (d) keeping a person in a state of servitude, including sexual servitude;
- (e) exploitation of the prostitution of another;
- (f) engaging in other forms of commercial sexual exploitation, such as pimping, pandering, procuring, profiting from prostitution, maintaining a brothel, child pornography, and online child exploitation;
- (g) slavery and servitude

The act also prohibits confiscation of identity documents.

Lebanon has ratified 7 of the 8 fundamental ILO conventions, which address key human rights issues of migrant labour including: forced labour, child labour, freedom of association, and equal opportunity and treatment at work. Lebanon has also criminalised human trafficking in Law 164 of 2011.

According to the provisions of the law, compelling a person to participate in any of the following acts shall be considered exploitation:

- (a) acts that are punishable by law;
- (b) prostitution or exploitation of the prostitution of others;
- (c) sexual exploitation;
- (d) begging;
- (e) slavery or practices that resemble slavery;
- (f) forcible or compulsory work;
- (g) this includes the forcible or mandatory recruitment of children to use them in armed conflicts;
- (h) forcible involvement in terrorist acts;
- (i) selling organs or tissue from the victim's body.

<sup>1</sup> ILO Indicators of Forced Labour, available at: [ILO Indicators of Forced Labour](#)

<sup>2</sup> Sierra Leone's Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act of 2022, available at: [The Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act, 2022](#)

## THE SIERRA LEONE CONTEXT - THE DOMINO EFFECT OF WAR

While over half of the Sierra Leone population lives in poverty, 10.8% live in extreme poverty, with levels in some rural areas as high as 72.4%. About 64.8% of the population is multidimensionally poor,<sup>6</sup> which means not only low income levels, but also poor health, malnutrition, low schooling levels, poor quality of work, and lack of access to clean water and electricity.<sup>7</sup> Life expectancy is currently at 54%,<sup>8</sup> with youth unemployment nearly hitting 60%.

During the civil war, large-scale mining, which was the mainstay of the economy, had been suspended, and even as the activity was picking up speed in the decade following the end of the war, other health crises created impediments to progress. Meanwhile, between 2004 and 2015, the population increased by 40% from 5 million in 2004 to 7 million in 2018 to close to 9 million currently. Without a corresponding growth in economic development, the situation looks dire, with limited social welfare and social protection coverage.

The remnants of war can still be seen two decades on in the scars the people bear, the widespread poverty, the high maternal and infant mortality rates, the high incidence of teenage pregnancy (21% adolescent pregnancy rates as per government baseline data<sup>9</sup> and 34% as per UN data<sup>10</sup>), broken families, and adults who had been orphaned as children. By some estimates, about 400,000 – mainly child soldiers and children of war – are mentally ill and have not received adequate post-traumatic treatment.<sup>11</sup> Drug abuse is rampant, and more recently, the synthetic drug Kush is wreaking havoc in society.<sup>12</sup> About a third of all recruits by the rebels during the decade of the Sierra Leonean Civil War were boys under the age of 18. About half of the then population were displaced, and close to 70,000 died. Because of the war and its fallout, children either joined or rejoined school at a much older age, so those entering senior school to sit for their West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) before higher

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6 SIERRA LEONE'S MEDIUM-TERM NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2019–2023 [SIERRA LEONE'S MEDIUM-TERM NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2019–2023](#)

7 Multidimensional Poverty Peer Network, What is Multidimensional Poverty? , available at: [MPPN What Is Multidimensional Poverty?](#)

8 Sierra Leone's Medium Term National Development Plan 2024-2030, available at: [Sierra Leone's Medium Term National Development Plan 2024 – 2030](#)

9 Sierra Leone Strategic Plan of Ministry of Social Welfare 2024-28, p15

10 UNFPA Sierra Leone, Population Matters, available at: [Population Matters](#)

11 A 2002 report by Dr. Soeren Buus Jensen for the WHO estimated that 400,000 of the country's citizens suffered from mental health disorders like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder—partly the result of their exposure to “severe potentially traumatic events” during the war. [Mental illness: Invisible but devastating | Africa Renewal](#)

12 NPR, Cheap, plentiful and devastating: The synthetic drug kush is walloping Sierra Leone., available at: [Kush, a cheap synthetic drug, is devastating Sierra Leone : Goats and Soda : NPR](#)

studies are often in their late teens or early 20s, by which time other familial responsibilities take priority and place an extra burden on them.

Strategies and policy documents reviewed for this report do not adequately address the specific vulnerabilities of youth, particularly young women, who are not confident of opportunities at home and take huge risks in migration. About 42% of the population is under 15 years of age, 19% are between 15 and 24 years, and roughly 25% are women of childbearing age (15-49 years).<sup>13</sup> More than the Ebola epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic, the decade-long civil war seems to continue impacting the decisions of the most vulnerable.

Under these compounded challenges, many young women – who were born during or immediately after the war – are now compelled to step in and be breadwinners and the backbone of struggling families and an unhealed society. The lack of foundational support creates a vulnerable demographic susceptible to exploitation by traffickers peddling elusive opportunities abroad.

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13 UNFPA Sierra Leone, Population Matters, available at: [Population Matters](#)

## INFO BOX 2: MINISTER OF SOCIAL WELFARE, MELROSE KARMINTY

In an interview, Sierra Leone Minister of Social Work Melrose A.T. Karminty discussed multiple vulnerabilities that Sierra Leonean citizens were still struggling with: “We have had civil war, the Ebola epidemic, the COVID-19 pandemic, flooding, mudslides, and youth unemployment, all of which have been triggers. We need to create employment through the private sector.” On the impact of war in particular, she adds there is a huge gap in response when it comes to uneducated youth: “The DDR<sup>1</sup> programme (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration) is there, but we need vocational training and opportunities for the youth after that.” Another important factor that she mentioned was teen pregnancies where young girls are also often abandoned by the men who father their children: “They become even more vulnerable. So when these programmes are presented to them, they rush to take them without even giving them a second thought. They also come back with strange diseases.”

Sierra Leone has introduced the Free Quality School Education Initiative, including free university education for girls wishing to pursue STEM: “One facet of the ongoing ‘radical inclusion’ programme in Sierra Leone is ensuring girls do not drop out of school due to pregnancy and motherhood. We are seeing attitudes changing, they re-enter school and do well. [...] The women go without the government’s knowledge. We hear on social media when they are in trouble. Most women who go abroad and suffer do want to go back, but then the question arises within their families: What are you coming back to? You’ve sold your land and taken a loan.”

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1 UN Peacekeeping, DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION DDR aims to return combatants of war back to communities, for ‘long-term peace, security and development’, available at: [Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration | United Nations Peacekeeping](#)

The inherited vulnerabilities and intergenerational trauma are evident in the migration experiences of the young Sierra Leonean women who travel abroad. On average, people in full-time employment earn as little as US\$50 a month, and those dependent on petty trading may earn well below that and sporadically. In this environment, an employment opportunity abroad, promising anywhere between US\$200 and US\$400, does appear to be a fortune. As a result, many borrow from friends and family, sell their land, pawn their assets, and pay the fees ranging between Leone 5mn and 15mn (US\$550-1600)<sup>14</sup> that the agent selling the programme asks for.

Brima Abdulai Sheriff, a Sierra Leonean activist who previously worked in the trafficking sector, feels people grow up in Sierra Leone, not knowing what the future holds for them: “So they say, for instance, you have been doing petty trading for six, seven years. Of course, it becomes some form of a subsistence pattern. You go do your petty trading; you have what to eat for that day. You are able to eat what you are able to save. So security of the future is one thing that also comes to mind. They say, ‘I am travelling because I want a better future.’”

The jobs in Sierra Leone barely sustain families, and there aren’t enough job opportunities for certain vulnerable groups, he says. “What sort of jobs are really available here for people at that age? Women that have just had high school education. Or women that even did not have high school education. And that is the opportunity that is provided in Lebanon, so to speak. I remember one woman saying, ‘Oh, we have been paid US\$150 a month in Lebanon.’ But you have food, you eat, so you can actually secure US\$150.”

As a result, thousands of Sierra Leoneans are willing to take a gamble and leave the country. From Guinea and Senegal, through Morocco and Ethiopia, until they reach the promised land where their fortune awaits, Lebanon has been that land for several years now.

Marian, one of the interviewees, says one reason for distress due to migration is the loss of parents: “If you have a father who is the breadwinner of the house, and all of a sudden you just wake up one day and he’s no more, who is going to provide for them? Everybody will be going out to know what they will do for their life. Maybe the mother is the breadwinner and all of a sudden she gets sick, and she is unable to do anything.”

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<sup>14</sup> An average of currency conversion rates between 2019 and 2024

Around the time Sierra Leone was in the midst of a civil war, Lebanon was emerging from its own civil war that lasted 15 years. Lebanon's domestic problems persist, with a tenuous and ineffective political system, geopolitical insecurity, and a series of economic recessions. The Lebanese diaspora is spread across several parts of the world, and quite prominently in West Africa. In Sierra Leone alone, the less than 10,000-strong population owns many businesses and the bulk of the hotels and restaurants.

The majority of women interviewed for this report had travelled to Lebanon between 2018 and 2022 and were subjected to the vagaries of countless downturns during the period – the 17 October (2019) protests and their continuation, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut port explosion, and the banking crisis that created shortages of currency, including US dollars, which is often used as a tender for commercial transactions instead of the Lebanese pound. Women interviewed repeat the excuse given by the employers for not paying at all or not paying as promised : “Ma’afi dollar in Lebanon” and “No sending dollar from Lebanon.”

The Executive Director of Sierra Leone's Anti Trafficking in Persons Secretariat Dehunga Shiaka feels the nature of the job itself – as ‘Khadamas’<sup>15</sup> – is a problem:

*“That’s a slave visa, so to speak. You go as slaves straight away. What they [returnees] tell us you interpret the relationship between the master and you, as the master and the slave. So the master owns you... And at times, what we hear is that they will take you from one master to another master. So they sell you, which is trafficking basically, to another master. And the last factor which is of concern to us is that anytime you try to escape, there’s a policy in place that the police will arrest you for escaping from your master.”*

He is also worried that in these situations the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) cannot do much, as their jurisdiction does not cover it. Sierra Leone depends heavily on IOM to bail out their citizens from countries where they are stranded. “The IOM assists people who are willing to come back to their countries but are not in detention.”

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<sup>15</sup> “Khadamas”: Pejorative Arabic word used to refer to domestic workers as servants.

# THE JOURNEY FROM SIERRA LEONE

## INFO BOX 3: NUMBERS AT A GLANCE

- 35 of the 41 women were all 30 years of age or under.
- 3 were as young as 18 when they went to Lebanon.
- More than 3/4 had either lost one or both parents.
- 35/41 had children, 21 of whom were single mothers.
- 17 of them were teen mothers, most having had their first child between the ages of 15 and 19.
- 2 had their children at the age of 13 and 14.
- The average recruitment fees paid range between US\$350 in 2019 and over US\$650 in the last couple of years.
- No one signed a contract pre-departure.
- For 7, the first port of exit was Lungi, Freetown, Sierra Leone.
- For 3, it was Senegal (unable to share the name of the airport).
- For 31, it was Conakry, Guinea.
- [In 2024, Leone 10 million = US\$445; in 2019, Leone 10 million = US\$1121]

## PYRAMID SCHEMES AND 'PROGRAMMES': HUGE RECRUITMENT FEES AND FALSE PROMISES

There is little to no oversight on the actions of recruiters in Sierra Leone. Though the Overseas Employment and Migrant Workers Act (2023)<sup>16</sup> lists terms of regulation of recruitment agents, in practice there are no signs of registered agents undertaking the recruitment process. The opportunities for employment abroad, referred to as programmes, can come from just about anyone – someone from one's own family to an absolute stranger approaching

them at their place of work. Not a single one of the interviewees had been to an office in Sierra Leone, or had a formal job offer pre-departure, nor signed a contract. [See Infobox 4: Illegal Recruitment] The majority of women interviewed have had to pay a fee to the "agent", contravening international guidelines on fair recruitment.<sup>17</sup>

MWA has noted a predatory pattern in how the 'agents' seek out young Sierra Leonean women to sell programmes to. It is a pyramid scheme of sorts where the agent rarely connects directly with the potential candidate, instead family, friends, or even school teachers are used as intermediaries. These intermediaries will target women that would be considered prime candidates for a job abroad: young, with little to no family support,

<sup>16</sup> The Overseas Employment and Migrant Workers Act, available at: [Overseas Employment and Migrant Workers Act, 2023 - Sierra Leone](#)

<sup>17</sup> See for example: the ILO Guiding Principles and Operational Guidelines on Fair Recruitment, available at: [General principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment and](#)

preferably with young children to support, and with education levels not beyond secondary school.

As Jariatu, a 29-year-old interviewee, shared, in 2020 her agriculture teacher reached out to her when she was in secondary school and offered her a programme. Her father's friend who supported her education had passed, and she was in limbo.<sup>18</sup> The teacher paid the Leone 10mn (US\$1000 in 2020) that was required, she recounts:

*“The teacher said I would get US\$100, and my madam paid him directly. I never make any money for myself. The money I made was to pay the teacher back. I never saw my money with my own eyes.”*

After 11 months of being overworked and unpaid, she returned home with her family's help in 2021. She adds: “I have never seen the teacher again with my eyes after I came back.”

MWA has found that quite often, the programme comes from those already abroad. Deceptive practices were rife, and misinformation about the roles and salaries awaiting the women in Lebanon was common. Many women were promised jobs in offices or businesses and did not expect to work as domestic workers.

For example, 28-year-old Alice was promised a role in a company by her friend: “I reached out to Fatmata, and I told her she is not good as she promised I would work in a company, but she accused me of not being serious. I told her she was a witch. I would have stayed in my country selling chicken if I had known I was coming to work as a housemaid. I don't know why she asked me to come. Her skin was bad, she was in bad shape.”

At 21, Sarah had just finished her secondary school in 2019. In order to pursue a university degree, she wanted to save money. She had a plan – to pay for a programme that would place her in a supermarket in Beirut, with a salary of US\$600, and an apartment to live in. When she landed, she was received by her employer and taken to his house. He introduced himself as her boss: “In the morning I was given a housemaid uniform by the madam, his wife. I was like this is not ok, I don't want this. I tried to call the person

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<sup>18</sup> Sierra Leone only recently made education free

who did the programme for me. But I can no longer get in touch with him. So I decided to start working, because I don't know anybody there.”

For Mary, 26, one of her townspeople, Aisha, working in Kuwait, had offered her a job in 2019. Aisha in turn connected her to a local agent who helped Mary with her paperwork for a Leone 7mn US\$750 fee. Mary tells MWA: “She said there was a nice job in Lebanon, but I didn't know it was as a housemaid. I was promised US\$400, but when I landed I was told I would get US\$200, but even that I did not receive.”

In 2019, Mariatu, 29, who had already lost both her parents, lost her elder sister as well. She was now responsible for not just her child but also her nephew: “I have a younger sister and these two children. I had to do prostitution to support them, to survive.” That was when a programme was sold to her by an agent, who promised she would earn US\$250 a month, which was a fortune for her. She left the two children in the care of her then 17-year-old sister and went to Lebanon. She worked in four households, and only received a salary for two months in total. “The last house I was beaten so badly and sexually assaulted that I ran away.”

Ayesha sold her mother's land to pay Leone 10 mn (~US\$1000) for the job in Lebanon. The agent even showed her the video of a supermarket she was supposed to work in. When she ended up in a house, sleeping in their curtained off balcony, the agent only said that the job was no longer available.

Time and again, a job that never existed is sold to recruit people for a job that does exist in all its exploitative grandeur. MWA believes that the deceptive measures carried out by the brokers and agents in Sierra Leone amplify the risk of exploitation. Once in Lebanon, domestic workers are left isolated with no knowledge of their rights and with little to no negotiating powers as no contract has been signed. Some, if not all, of these cases fulfil the definition of human trafficking.

## **A CLOSER LOOK: THE “PROGRAMME” SELLERS AKA AGENTS**

In the middle of a circle of tin-roofed houses in Makeni, a pregnant woman named Marion and her child are playing Ludo under an aged tree. This is Augusta's older sister; her mother, Maria, sits on the tree stump, and her younger brother joins the conversation. In bits and pieces, the story is told, as no one has the whole picture.

Augusta,<sup>19</sup> at the time of the conversation with her family, was at a safehouse in Beirut. Maria says her daughter had sent home only Leone 500,000 (~US\$500) so far. Maria and her youngest son are not in agreement of what happened to the daughter, only that she was in trouble and ill and needed to get back home. She had gone abroad with the help of a neighbourhood woman, but they had not reached out to her.

At this point, the pregnant sister, Marion, chips in. Her husband is one of the informal agents that is “helping women” go to Lebanon, she says. But he was not involved in her sister’s recruitment. As Marion, a returnee migrant from Kuwait herself, shares how women are recruited and placed, it becomes clear that she was the driving force behind her husband’s business. She shares: “Most families of the women come to my husband and accuse him of selling their children. Many of the women he sent are still there. They don’t give them food, like most of them run away and some of them, we do not even hear from them again. They [the families] believe a lot of them already died in Lebanon,” she drops casually. “I am not feeling good [about him sending people there] because he was getting too much pressure here, [even if] he didn’t do anything.”

Marion says in Kuwait she had a very good employer, and she managed to save money: “The agent in Kuwait talks to me, and you know in Sierra Leone there are no jobs, so he started telling me that there are good madams like mine, so I started sending girls. But now there are no visas to Kuwait. So the agent in Kuwait gave me the agent in Lebanon. And that’s the agent that my husband works with. As for me, I am not able to move around to find people,” she says, patting her pregnancy bulge.

The husband, who had been out and about on work, returns home but is reluctant to be interviewed, and ignores all the questions posed to him. Marion says she knows the business and will give the lowdown.

“We request money like Leone 5mn for just their passport and ticket. The girls borrow [from us] if they don’t have money and will pay back once they start earning. And the office tells my husband they will give money to us when the girl comes. But the office in Lebanon doesn’t always give the money once the lady goes there. Even the girls don’t give back, as they say they got less than what was promised. So they give back little, little. Maybe 4 mn, 5 mn. Some of them will not pay. It’s not compulsory. The girls also call and cry. And then run away because they don’t get food or are not treated properly, so they don’t earn.”

<sup>19</sup> Augusta has since returned to Sierra Leone, but at the time of interview in May 2024, she was still in Lebanon

When women call with problems, the agents are often in a bind, she says.

“When the office is good, they take her and find a different house. They move them to a different house. If the office is bad, they won’t even pick the call, they will say I am busy, I am on vacation, I am driving...”

Her husband works with agents in three different offices in Lebanon. These are the agents introduced to him by the Kuwaiti contact. The agents at destination are supposed to provide him with a commission for every successful deployment, but Marion says this is not always the case, and they are unable to force the Lebanese office to pay up.

*“He has no office here; he works just like a friend. Like when I see you now I have your contact, me and you become friends. Maybe I have an offer. I can call the office and say I have two clients; they have no money, and they say we can provide tickets and visas. This is the way we operate. Say, if the house of this client is not good, they will change straight away. Maybe the next house that you can give her is a good house, so she can stay there.”*

Marion and her husband have been doing this work for 10 years, and have managed 40 sets of programmes, each deploying 3 to 7 girls. The most frequent complaint is about the madam, she says. “Sometimes the sons of the madam took advantage of the girls, they rape them. Some are complaining about food. Even though you prepare the food, you don’t eat it.”

Though she is intimately aware of the problems faced by migrant women in Lebanon, she says she doesn’t tell them that, only about the job they have to do. “When they come to meet my husband, I don’t shut up, I tell them clearly what the job is. Not to dress up and go outside.”

The couple sends women to Oman, Iraqi Kurdistan, Dubai, and Lebanon, and the most problems are in Lebanon, according to her. “Some of the madams don’t value us. They treat us like trash because we are Africans. Lebanon doesn’t pay. They will tell you US\$250, then when you go there they will give you US\$100.”

Currently, they are unable to get visas for Lebanon because the girls are running away, Marion says. “Even the madams don’t want Sierra Leone

girls. They don't know the treatment they give the girls will make them run away. They think the money they give for the visa and ticket is for buying the girl."

Despite the widespread problems, she says they will continue the work. "If I say no they will go to someone [else] and they will send them. There are no jobs in Sierra Leone. You help a few and they go safe, and then more come to you. There are too many agents in Makeni alone. I know four of them. They take people and bring them to my husband."

## A LONG WAY OUT

The journey from Sierra Leone to Lebanon is fraught with obstacles. The majority of those interviewed had flown out of Conakry, Guinea. Sierra Leone's international airport is in Lungi, roughly 25 km north of Freetown and separated by the sea. The way to enter the capital city is either via an expensive sea coach ride, or a long ferry ride, or by a circuitous highway that could take a few hours. The airport also levies a security tax of US\$25 each way, and flights from Lungi are more expensive than flying out of neighbouring airports, and the cost differential could be anywhere between US\$200 to even US\$600.

A typical flight route would require either flying into Accra or Marrakech and then taking a flight to the final destination, usually via Addis Ababa or Istanbul. For those living in the northern and central parts of the country, crossing the border to Guinea, even by foot, and then travelling to Conakry is not only a lot cheaper, but quicker. Not to mention, there are fewer questions asked at the immigration checkpoints. On why the majority travel from Conakry and not Lungi, Marion explains: "First of all the ticket is very expensive from Lungi, US\$300 or US\$400 more. And again here, very security. The smallest mistake, they will crush you out. In Guinea, they don't check too much. It's very easy."

28-year-old Alice was a street vendor whose mother could not pay for her university. In 2019, her friend Fatmata who had been in Lebanon since 2008 connected her to someone in Kuwait who organised her programme to go work for a company. Alice was taken to Senegal, where they kept her and others in a room for a month. The agent told them there were no tickets to Lebanon. During the month she was held in Senegal, she was not allowed to go out, and there was no food. She had to seek help from her family to send money for food. She asked to return but was refused, told the ticket was delayed and that she would be sent to Lebanon.

# ONCE IN LEBANON

## INFO BOX 4: NUMBERS AT A GLANCE

- All 41 reported that passports were confiscated immediately upon landing by immigration officials and handed over to the employer or agent, whoever received them at the airport.
- 22 of them had their phones confiscated.
- 5 of those who did have their phones on them either kept it hidden, or were allowed to use it only on weekends.
- Only 1 was taken to an agency from the airport, the rest were taken by their employer directly.
- Not a single one of them was given a contract to sign on arrival.
- Almost all of the women interviewed worked in multiple homes either simultaneously or consecutively.
- Only in 7 households was a room provided. In the rest of the instances, they were made to sleep in the balcony, kitchen, verandah, or the parlour. One of them was made to sleep alongside the animals she was tending to.
- All 41 of them faced some type of wage theft in one or more employment relationships.
- Only 2 received the salary they were promised at home, but not continuously.
- 19 of the 41 women said they were sexually abused, raped or fought attempted rape.
- 2 of them speak in detail about resorting to sex work to survive, while 3 others indicate they have done that.
- 20 of them said they were repatriated with the help of IOM.
- [In 2024, Lebanese Pound 10 million = US\$112; In 2019, Lebanese Pound 10 million = US\$6600]

Despite its fragile economy and not so promising outlook, the recruitment of migrant domestic workers continues. Hiring and employing a domestic worker is often viewed as essential and indispensable, even when the household cannot afford to do so. The idea of hiring a domestic worker as a need and not a privilege is one of the root causes of why MDWs are treated so poorly. The racist and sexist perception of African MDWs combined with the entitlement of having a domestic worker in every household, has normalised exploitation and abuse. Prior to 2019, a quarter of the households employed a MDW, which translates to about 300,000 MDWs for just over 4mn citizens. Employers pay steep recruitment fees to hire workers, which they often feel absolves them of further financial obligations. The recruitment fees are either paid as a lump sum

upfront, or as instalments on a monthly basis. These instalments are paid in lieu of salaries to workers. When workers wish to return, employers refuse to pay for the ticket, and even demand that workers reimburse them for the recruitment fees incurred by them.

## PASSPORT CONFISCATION

Migrant women, even if they leave behind their children and families with some trepidation, land with hope. It takes less than a couple of hours after landing for that hope to wane. Immediately upon landing, Lebanese immigration officials collect the passports of the workers and hold them in what workers describe as a large saloon that is dirty and smelly, without access to food or water, and a washroom that is unhygienic. If one is lucky, they stay only for 4-6 hours, but some have stayed a night or two.

The passports are handed over to the employer or recruitment agent that collects the workers from the airport. That is the last the migrant workers see of the only identity document they possess in a foreign land. Even if some of them demand it to be returned, they are told that since they have been ‘bought’ their passports were collateral – “They took my passport because they said they paid my agent money for me,” says Ramatu.

Lebanese law does not explicitly prohibit the withholding of a migrant worker’s passport. However, there have been judicial decisions that have stated that withholding passports of domestic workers clearly contravenes international law. Despite this, nearly all MDWs coming into Lebanon see their passport confiscated. This restricts their freedom of movement and creates a significant obstacle for their return home.

## DEHUMANISATION & ABUSE: DEPRIVED OF FOOD, OVERWORKED AND UNDERPAID

*“I ask madam, I am hungry, I want to eat. They say no, not now. They give food only once a day. They would give food at 3pm and only empty rice. Even if I am sick [and] I told my madam that I will not feel bright. She said I will not be in Lebanon to be sick, I am in Lebanon to work because they already spend for me, they buy me. So I am not supposed to be sick.” Ramatu*

MWA’s gathered testimonies uncovered numerous labour and human rights violations experienced by all interviewed migrant domestic workers (MDWs). These abuses included confiscation of passports, excessive working hours, restricted freedom of movement, food deprivation, lack of rest days, underpayment or non-payment of wages, poor living conditions, and verbal abuse. In some instances, MDWs also reported physical and

sexual abuse. This led many of the women to feel compelled to flee from their employers' homes. MWA finds that the patterns of abuse reported in these interviews constitute forced labour.

One of the main abuses reported was the long hours of work and lack of adequate or regular food. While food that suited their palate was impossible, even the regular meal was dished out as a treat or motivation by many employers. Employers would withhold food or provide stale leftovers.

“They will give me food but not new food. The food will stay in the fridge for two weeks, three weeks. They will give me that food. They will never give me new food. The food that they will eat every day, I will never eat this food,” says Jariatu.

Months of not receiving proper food has a long-lasting impact. Musu, (26,) was sold a programme by her friend in 2021, and travelled to Lebanon along with the Lebanese agent's brother. Her madam's husband ran a fishery business in Ghana and Sierra Leone. “I suffer a lot. They forced me to wear a hijab. The madam didn't give food or water, unless I finish work. When I came back, I was so small, so sick, so skinny. And my family saw me; they started crying,” says the mother of a 10-year-old.

Mary worked for a household of five from 5am till after midnight. “I cleaned and cooked, but didn't get food. I had to steal food, hide, and eat.”

*“They overused me. Like I wake up at five in the morning. Work till twelve midnight. It's not easy. We only take tea in the morning. Then they have that kind of bread (signals a circle) like five, six in the evening,” recalls Mariatu, 29-year-old, 2019*

Despite not paying their employees regularly or as promised, employers are often reluctant to let them go. Adama worked for 2 years with the same employer, even though she was paid just US\$50 a month instead of the promised US\$350. “The madam and her husband want to fight with me. I don't like to speak much. I told them, please, I'm not here for a problem. I'm here for a job. I'm finished with my contract. I want to return back home. I just want you people to help me. Even if you will not pay for me, I will pay for myself just to leave here.”

When she refused to work and staged a sit-in, the employers retaliated by not giving her food or water for three days. “Then I escaped and found a girl from Sierra Leone. Her name is Fatima, and she was there for a long

time. She said okay, call your family, then they will try for you to leave here. Fatima helped me and I stayed there for one week. Then I travelled.”

Fata had paid her best friend Leone 13mn (~US\$1400) in 2019 by selling her land, as the promise of a US\$250 salary was too good to pass. From the Beirut airport, she was taken far away to a village: “The first day I went, I was so glad because I saw this compound, so beautiful. I did not know that I was going to suffer there. In the night, they give me a place to lie down – with the animals. Goats and other animals that they have there.” In the mornings, she had to feed the livestock, clean the area, and tend to them the whole day. In the year she stayed there, she only received in a total of 1500 Lebanese Pounds. “When we change it here, it’s only Leone 2mn (~US\$210),” she remembers. “I was there [with the animals] all day, all night. Taking care of the animals. At night, the elder son tried to sexually abuse me, but I did not agree with him. So, I decided to leave the place, and told them.” The employer called the police and had her arrested: “They said that I beat their children, that I want to kill their children.”

She went to prison for six months until the IOM facilitated her return to Sierra Leone. “It is too painful for me. I don’t want to talk any more.” She ends the interview.

In what the young women share and what they evade, there are untold stories of trauma. Juliette was 15 when she had her child, and by the time the child turned 8, she said there was very little she could do in Sierra Leone to run her family. In 2019, she landed in Lebanon. Since her parents were deceased, she left her child with her grandmother.

Her employer said they would pay the first two months’ salary of US\$400 to the agent, as that was the agreement. There were so many caveats to her not only getting her salary but even getting regular food. “No food, no food, you finish work,” she repeated her employer’s condition. After the first two months, they said they would pay her US\$600 after she completed three months. “So I worked for three more months, though I did not want to. When I asked, she said she would send it home. Then she didn’t and gave excuses – ‘Lebanon problem. No dollar. Ma’afi dollar.’” Her employer claimed they were not allowed to send money from Lebanon to Africa at that point.

“I said I will be patient, and when everything is okay, you give me money. So I continued. Most of my friends were leaving the house. For me, I said I will be patient. I stayed for 1 year and 3 months.”

Juliette was given 600 Lebanese Pounds after repeated pleading, and insisted she return home. The employer demanded US\$3000 for her to break the contract. That was when she decided to leave the house. A friend here in Sierra Leone connected her to a friend there, who stayed in a place near Sabra,<sup>20</sup> and that's where she ended up.

There was an unreasonable expectation from the Lebanese employers that women from extremely impoverished countries who have left their families behind for survival forgo their salary because they could not (or would not) afford it.

Demoh left her infant behind in 2019, with the promise of a supermarket job that would pay her US\$300. The first house she worked in for six months but was not paid a salary. "The madam said I will not give you now. When the money is plenty, I will give you, [in] 3-4 months I will give you. She said no money. No money now. Lebanon no money now." Meanwhile, her infant child, who was with her mother, had fallen ill in Sierra Leone. "So I started to cry. On my friend's advice, I asked her to take me back to the office so they can find another house where they can pay me. Madam said, 'Oh, you cannot go back to the office. I paid for you \$3,000 to come to Lebanon.' And I said, me too, I pay money. I don't know if you paid for me."

Even as her own child was fighting for his life, the children of her employer provided her some solace. "The babies, they love me. They cried when I left." At the office she was held in a room for a few days with a couple of other African women, with nothing but stale bread.

"The next house was far from the city in a village. The madam paid me US\$200 for three months and then stopped. But I was made to work in her house, her daughter's house, and at the restaurant by the beach, to wash dishes. I worked from 5am to 1am every day." During the pandemic the restaurant business was hit, and the employer said there was no money to pay her. Demoh stayed there for a year, hoping against hope that she would be paid. Finally, she ran from the house when she was refused medical treatment for excruciating stomach pain, and around the time she also heard that her baby back home had passed away.

"I had something bulky inside and had a surgery at the MSF hospital... It was an emergency. I had a hernia and a cyst," she says, showing her medical reports and photos from when she was in the hospital there. "I want a baby, I don't know if I can have," she cried.

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<sup>20</sup> Sabra is an area in Beirut where many migrant workers frequent and reside. Also the area where many women are forced into situations of sexual exploitation and violence.

Alimatu worked in a village in the house of a family that ran a Labneh (Levantine yogurt) factory. The very first day, she had a fall from the ladder and cut herself on the face, the scar a daily reminder after 5 years. The family refused to take her to the hospital, and that was the start of nine long months of gruelling work without pay.

“I had to work in their house and where they make Labneh and sell. I had to carry the baskets and put it in the fridge and take it out. You can’t put the fridge off. I would feel cold all over, freezing. After 4 months, when I asked for money, they said they would pay only US\$100 not US\$250. I said this work is too much. I work for your factories, and I also work for you in the house. So I am not going to accept that little money.” She stopped working, demanding to be paid and have her phone back. They gave her the phone and sent US\$300 to her family as payment for 4 months. After a few months, Alimatu once again threatened she would stop working if they didn’t pay her. By then, her old eye injury when she fell from the ladder had aggravated, and her eye was swollen shut, she says.

“Madam’s daughter was very kind. She said, ‘This is very wicked. Take this girl to the hospital. Look at her condition, and yet still she is working.’ Only then they took me to the hospital and the doctor had to do a painful treatment (the scar on her eyelid is visible). He asked me to rest for a week. I got only one day rest.”

With no hope of receiving any of her dues, Alimatu ran away and returned in February 2021

## **PHYSICAL ASSAULT & SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

*“In Beirut, my employer’s brother tried raping me. I fought and pushed him and he hit his head. They called the police and they put me in prison for four months!” Fanta*

Nearly half of the women interviewed had been victims of some form of sexual abuse or rape. Some were forced into sex work in the households they were employed in, at the agency office, and sometimes by those who offered to help them. In some instances, even requests for salary were countered with demands for sexual favours. Many also recounted emotional and verbal abuse.

Demoh recalls an instance when she needed money as her infant was in desperate need of treatment. “I asked the baba where is my money, he is an alcoholic; he was drinking, and he said, ‘Me and you, fuck. Fuck, I give you money.’ He would always try when I was alone in the house and the madam was out. I was scared to even complain to the madam.”

Kadiacu had been to Lebanon first in 2014. She remembers reaching the house and being doused in hot water even before crossing the threshold. “She said, ‘I am a black. I am not supposed to mingle with them. I have virus in my body.’ My entire luggage was washed too.”

Ramatu worked in three different households and was subjected to different forms of abuse, the recruitment office changing her from one household to the next without addressing the issues she faced. “The first madam, her husband, raped me. Madam didn’t believe me and said I was lying and beat me. But I complained to the agent, and he said just keep working. And I had to because I needed the money, but he did not come to me again. But they treated me so bad,” she recalls. In another house, she had to dodge the camera at home to steal food and eat in the bathroom. In the last house she was given proper food and a room – “but they didn’t pay me salary, and I had three children back home, so I ran away.”

A 24-year-old mother of two, who went to Lebanon in 2022 says she had to steal food to eat. The young son of her employer demanded sex as a barter for food. “He would dangle a piece of bread in front of me, demanding sex.”

At the homes of the employers, the women had to constantly fight off sexual overtures from teenagers and adult men alike. The female employers refused to entertain complaints and blamed the workers instead.

Marta left behind her two kids and went to Lebanon in 2015, when she was just 24. “My madam, she likes me. But her husband was not there with them then, he was in another state. Just the madam and two kids. We were happy. Then he comes. When the madam is not around one day, he attempted to rape me. So I fight back. When the madam came later, I told her and we looked at the camera and find out that her husband is trying to rape me. But she beats me. The madam said that I wanted to spoil her marriage. So I tried to tell her that it is not me, that her husband was forcing himself on me. Then the woman started to beat me and sent me out of the house.”

Sexual violence was also used as a tool by agents to break workers, to force them into submission or persuade them to continue working in exploitative households.

One interviewee lifts up her skirt to show a swollen, twisted ankle: “When my employer tried raping me, I fought him off. So they beat me up and returned me to the office. And I was raped by my agent there as I was too weak and too sick to fight him off. He said if I complained, he would kill me in that country and no one would be able to find me.” The agent in Lebanon, despite her complaints, insisted she continue to work. “He said he would force me to go stand on the streets at night for prostitution to raise money.”

On a staple diet of stale food or none at all, she started vomiting blood, at which point she reached out to what she says is the Sierra Leone embassy. And as most rescues go, after her treatment in the hospital, she spent a few months in an apartment in Jnah with other women from the country, before registering with the IOM to return in January 2023.

A 23-year-old petty trader, Amnata, is a single mother who had her child when she was just 17. After buying a programme she found herself in Tripoli, Lebanon, working for a family of 12. “Initially they gave me food, but later they started withholding. When I complained, the agent said ‘buy food with your salary’. It was too little, if I bought food I would have nothing to send home.” She was also made to work in the employer’s daughter’s house in a neighbouring village. And for the six months she was with the family, she received only US\$150. The breaking point for her was when the brother of the employer molested her.

*“I called the agent to complain, and then the employer took out a gun and laid it on the table and threatened to kill me, and throw my body out and said ‘no one will ask about you’. Because he would tell people I run away. That’s how I became aware that people can run away and live on the streets.”*

She stayed with the community for four months, before returning with the help of IOM.

Five of the women had worked both in the household of their employers and in their businesses – like restaurants, boutiques and the Labneh factory. But by far the most dangerous was what Fatmata had to endure.

“This place I worked in was far from the city. The man I was working for is a drug dealer. They sell different types of drugs, and I was not feeling secure. I was also working till 12-1 am in the night, but even then I won’t sleep as long as people were coming to buy drugs. So I told them I want to leave. They beat me up,” she says, showing fading scars on her leg. “They tied me up outside the house for two days as I refused to go inside. I was there only for 28 days. It was winter and I fell very ill, so they sent me to the office.” Ali, the agent, refused to let her go, and placed her in yet another house. “I could not bear the harassment from the son there, though the madam was nice, so I ran away.”

Mina was made to sleep outside the house, in what she described as a farmhouse.

*“I had to sell myself for food to eat. After I finished the work, I go outside. So I have to get somebody [with whom] I can sleep so he can give me food to eat. They were not paying me enough for me to buy my food, and they said that money is for food.”*

After five months, she ran away from the house and was offered help by a Lebanese man who saw her distress. Even as she recounts her experiences, a good five years later, she seems disturbed and was unable to hold back her tears, saying her story was very difficult. Declining to take a break from the interview, she says the man who rescued her ended up exploiting her too. “I thought he was a gentleman, but he took me home and treated me like a sex slave. He used me sexually for six months. I was servicing the man fully, doing domestic work, and at the same time sex too.”

As the interview progressed, she struggled to remain seated and stood up. By way of explanation, she says when the man had sex with her repeatedly, she was bleeding every time. When she started developing malodorous blisters around her pubic area, he threw her out on the road.

“Later I found out I had gonorrhoea. People could not stand next to me, the smell was so bad.” She was rescued and helped by the Sierra Leonean community and returned to Sierra Leone in March 2020.

“I had some treatment after coming back, but I am still not ok. Even now, it burns when I pass urine. The doctors told repeated unprotected sex made my condition worse.”

Mata currently works in the Lungi airport and observes the ones returning this way, as well as those going abroad, but does not ask them any questions. Her own trauma is still fresh in her mind. “I worked in my madam’s house and in their boutique that sold formal clothes. I probably slept for 3-4 hours, and they did not even pay me the US\$250 they promised, just US\$150.” When she protested and refused to work after nine months, the agent whose name she recalls is Reham, placed her in another house. “This madam had 2 sons, and the first one , 18-year-old, tried to rape me, and I shouted and the father came out. I then said I will not sleep in this house that night, to take me back to the office.”

But to escape completely unscathed is uncommon. Farah is training to be a nurse, though she would like to go abroad if she receives a good programme. She is at a local NGO in Freetown to raise the case of her sister, 19-year-old Marcia. Marcia was just 17 when she left for Lebanon in 2022 with forged documents that presented her as a 22-year-old. The agent who sent her is now threatening the family, as she had run away from her employer. The girls are two of six children and have lost both parents. Farah is not completely certain of what her sister is going through, and only knows that she may be in danger. Over a video call, Marcia, who barely looks 17 still, says she fears for her life. She has taken refuge in the apartment shared by other Sierra Leonean women near Sabra market.

Detailing her experience, she says the first two houses she was placed in, the work was too much, and she was not paid. On being returned to the office the second time, the agent hired her out for freelance work. This included all kinds of jobs that she was not comfortable detailing, but included housework paid for by the hour. During one such gig, she was taken to the house of her employer’s friend, where she witnessed and recorded the domestic worker there being beaten up for asking for her due wages.

“I have all the evidence, but I can’t send it to anyone. They threaten me that if I post a video or I send it to anyone, or if anyone listens to the voice where they are shouting at a girl or where they are hitting her, they will kill me... I believe it, because they beat me before. So I am very afraid to even go to work.”

When she went back to the office, her boss and agent asked her to stay away from the girl who is being abused. “Even if they kill her it’s not my business, he said.” She ran away soon after to her friend’s place in Sabra and has no idea what became of the other girl.

At the time of the phone call, Marcia was ill but was afraid to go to the doctor as she does not have documents and is also worried that she may be caught by the agent or the employer. “Sabra itself is a very dangerous place. There are foreigners staying here. They see you outside, sometimes they assault us. Then they just evict us. They point weapons at us.”

Juliette, who also stayed in Sabra, says she is not sure if she really regrets leaving the employer based on what transpired after she reached out to her friend. “I had no choice. I had family to support, if my employer had paid me and I still left I would regret it.” “My friend gave me an idea. She also does the same business. There were many women in that apartment doing this work. Kadiacu gave me money to buy nice clothes. I later paid her back. Before I went to her place she just told me you come and we do part-time job. She didn’t tell me it was this work. If I had known I would have stayed in madam house, maybe?”

The very day she reached the apartment in Sabra, her friend told her, “You are beautiful, you have a nice body, these people like this kind of body,” and asked her to go with the two men who accompanied her.

“I stayed there for some months. We started to go to the streets, especially to a place near Bourj Hammoud and Dawra area. You just dress nicely, men just take you, they have their guest house. I started doing this three times a week. Once I went up [to the house] with three men, we do it, and they give me 300 Lebanese [pound]. Then the guy come back with three of his friends and fight me for the money. I had other money, too, that I kept inside my blouse. They tried taking everything. They kicked me. Then some Nigerian girls came and helped me, and gave me medicines. Some men are decent, they just do it quietly and go.”

The money she made there was just to survive, she says. “... You pay bills, you feed, you understand me? You don’t make money to send home.”

Survivor-leader and activist Lucy Turay<sup>21</sup> says sex work is common because it is the only way to survive and only option in some cases: “ Even if you don’t do it, as soon as men see you there, they think you are part of that work, they will sexually molest you. This is a stigma that travels back with them to Sierra Leone. “Even if you are not [doing this work], they all believe that was the job of every girl who runs away. A lot of them lose their family when they return. They get divorced from husbands. Even my husband

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21 Lucy had mobilised women like her at the height of the pandemic in 2020, and helped repatriate a couple of hundred women back to Sierra Leone from Lebanon. She had also fought for and helped several women access medical care during that period. She now continues her fight in Sierra Leone as a co-founder of DoWAN centre.

said, ‘I heard every girl that run away in Lebanon; the only way to survive is sex’ – I told him the next time he says that I will leave the house. Why do you have to say that, you know I ran away?”

## **A CLOSER LOOK:**

### **“MA’AFI DOLLARS IN LEBANON” - THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS**

Over the last three years, MWA has seen an increasingly worsening situation for MDWs in Lebanon due to the socio-economic crisis that has brought a depreciation of the country’s currency. The crisis has hit all Lebanese, displaced persons, and migrant workers. An increasing number of employers have used the excuse of the economic crisis to justify not paying MDWs wages. It also resulted in an overall worsening of the situation for migrant workers, with profound implications for their dignity and health. Yet governments in sending countries continue to sign bilateral deals with Lebanon, and daily or weekly flights with many migrant workers.<sup>22</sup>

In 2019, Isotu, a then 20-year-old secondary school graduate, went to Lebanon, a place she had not even heard of before. Though her first employer was overworking her, she was soon moved to the house of an elderly couple. “They treated me very well. I was there for close to a year, and they allowed me to speak to my mother once a month. They paid me US\$125 a month for the first four months. Then they said they can’t pay me any more as the economy not good and ‘No dollars in Lebanon.’”

They asked her to go to the nearest police station to seek help. The police then put her in touch with a Committee leader who housed her in an apartment with six other girls until she returned.

Leaving behind three kids, the youngest 1, and the oldest 10, Aminata,31, went to Lebanon in 2018. She worked for the same employer for three years, in a village called Batru. She was promised US\$200, but they paid her only for 1 year and 6 months. “They treated me well, only salary they didn’t give me. The madam told me that ‘Lebanon is not good. No money. I said, okay, no money, take me back to my country. They said they don’t have money to take me to my country.” She then went in search of people who could help her and ended up in the apartment in Jnah along with her compatriots. The often repeated story of transiting in these apartments before registering with the IOM to return.

<sup>22</sup> Translation: No dollars in Lebanon

After moving from the first employer, Ayesha worked with the second employer for nearly two years, of which she was not paid for seven months. "Madam kept saying ma'afi dollar, there is no money. Her daughter tried telling her, I has a daughter; why aren't you paying? The daughter was very nice to me." When she insisted on being paid, the sons beat her, and she ran from the house. And all roads seem to lead to an apartment in Jnah.

## **ESCAPING ABUSE: INCREASED VULNERABILITIES AND LACK OF PROTECTION**

When faced with abusive work conditions and exploitation, many MDWs run away and escape from their employers/sponsors' abusive households. In some cases, they spend nights homeless on the streets until finding access to temporary accommodations. Many try to rely on their social networks for temporary and often precarious accommodation, such as shared flats run by members of the community and as a result become unable to meet their basic needs, facing increasing psychosocial stress, and acute health concerns.

With not many safehouses or temporary accommodations in Lebanon, the community steps in to support each other. The African community gathers in certain areas, and within that each nationality finds its own support group. The experience is not uniform – some are treated well and feel safe, while some are re-traumatised by the work forced upon them, or taken advantage of by those offering to help them.

Through its work with the Sierra Leonean community in Lebanon, MWA has found that these accommodations often are part of the problem. Many of those spaces are squalid, inadequate, and exacerbate the vulnerability of the MDWs residing in them.<sup>23</sup> With the economic crisis in Lebanon, many temporary shelters have had to close down, limiting the availability of adequate safe spaces for women escaping exploitation and abuse. For example, in 2022, MWA documented the cases of 168 Sierra Leonean MDWs who escaped from exploitative and abusive conditions in their respective employer's households. The majority did not know the name of their employers and were looking to return to Sierra Leone. The MDWs found themselves in inadequate accommodations in overcrowded

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<sup>23</sup> See for example: MWA Homelessness and the Kafala System, available at: [Homelessness as a Cause and a Consequence of Contemporary Forms of Slavery](#)

conditions, with 30 women using a small squat toilet and no bathrooms, which in some instances exacerbated existing health conditions.

Though Mary initially worked in their home in Beirut, she was taken to their second home in a place called Boqaata, quite far from the city. It was there that she was slapped by the 20-year-old eldest son for complaining about long hours and mistreatment and decided to take a risk and run away: “My employer called me and threatened to kill me if they caught me.” She had managed to contact one of the other women who had travelled with her to Lebanon, who helped her reach Beirut to stay in a place she says the embassy provided. There were 20 others in this apartment when Mary reached.

Fama had a fairly good experience when she first landed in Lebanon in 2021. She doesn't remember the name of the village, which was up in the mountains. She was promised US\$200 and did receive that in the initial months. They even allowed her to cook her own food. “Then my 11-year-old son died, and I was grieving and crying. They got discouraged by my behaviour and started treating me badly.” She had one other son who was just 4 years of age at that point, and she wanted to return home, which they refused. That's when she decided to run away to Beirut in search of “the place other Africans live.” She had a sister-in-law in Beirut who was grievously injured and paralysed. She added, “I could not return immediately. I stayed in an apartment in Jnah for two years, taking care of her. When IOM helped me return in 2023 January, my sister-in-law FEK could not come as she was not eligible for the IOM repatriation; it would have cost a lot of money. She died soon after I returned.”

According to activists who had fought for FEK's repatriation, she had suffered extensive abuse and starvation. Lack of medical care that led to her paralysis and ultimately her death. “Even to bring back her body, they asked for Leone 60mn (~US\$2600 in 2024), so eventually she was buried there alone,” says survivor-activist Lucy Turay. For the grieving mother, losing her sister-in-law close on the heels of losing her firstborn has left deep emotional scars.

## **THE ROLE OF THE CONSULATE AND THE “COMMITTEE”**

There is no Sierra Leone embassy in Lebanon, just an honorary consulate office with a Lebanese consulate general. The Honorary Consul himself has a reputation of being inactive and making false promises of support and assistance. Scores of Sierra Leonean MDWs as well as community

leaders and other partner organisations have reported to MWA over the years about the failure of the honorary consulate to provide basic protection and assistance to MDWs in situations of abuse and exploitation, including instances of deceased MDWs. In an investigative report published by the Lebanese independent media platform, Daraj, accused several of the Honorary Consulates present in Lebanon of complicity in the exploitation of migrant domestic workers under the Kafala system.<sup>24</sup>

In March 2023, following a fire in an apartment in Sid El-Bouchrieh, a suburb north of Beirut, where seven Sierra Leonean MDWs passed away, the responsibility for repatriation and follow-up with the local authorities would lie with the Honorary Consulate.<sup>25</sup> However, the Honorary Consulate failed to act adequately and was confronted with a protest by the community, demanding an investigation into the causes of the fire as well as repatriation of the deceased.<sup>26</sup> It was later reported by a community member that despite the promise of repatriation of the deceased back to Sierra Leone, the Honorary Consulate at the end facilitated the burial of the women in unnamed graves in Tripoli, North Lebanon.

In addition to the Honorary Consulate, there exists a committee composed of seven Sierra Leonean men, who allegedly provide support to the wider community. Many women believe that a few Committee Leaders who help them — are part of the ‘embassy’, and they help them return either through the IOM or otherwise. For example, an ‘embassy-provided’ apartment is mentioned by almost all of the women interviewed. Sometimes it’s near Sabra market and sometimes in Jnah. This place is a transit point before registering with the IOM to return, or until their family is able to send them money to pay for their return fare. However, it is important to note that various civil society organisations, community leaders, and MDWs in Lebanon have previously reported that members of the Committee were involved in financial or sexual exploitation of some of the women. MWA has also received reports that these men have fraudulently claimed a partnership with the IOM.

## **“THE OFFICE” AND THEIR RECRUITMENT RACKET**

While ‘the (recruitment) Office’ is the first place of return after working for an abusive household, the women interviewed say they are treated badly there too, so have little choice but to find their community outside. Mata

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<sup>24</sup> Daraj Investigative Report, available at: Lebanon: [Honorary Consuls Exploiting Women Migrant Workers - Daraj](#)

<sup>25</sup> Global Times Newspaper, available at: [Sierra Leone’s Honorary Consul In Lebanon Assures Sierra Leoneans Living In Lebanon – Global Times Newspaper](#)

<sup>26</sup> The National, available at: [Sierra Leonean women grieve after suspicious housefire kills four in Lebanon](#)

escaped her agent's office and stayed with the Sierra Leone community in a shared apartment. She says, "We worked in a factory that makes cups and spoons. We were 15 of us there in that place, and we all did this work for a few months, to survive. Until we were sent back with IOM's help."

Every single worker interviewed said the first time they knew there was an 'office' or an 'agent' in Lebanon as well was when the employer 'returns' them to the office. The office then becomes a transit point between several placements, each worse than the other. When workers complained that they were not told about working as 'housemaids', the agents would cajole and threaten, forcing them to return.

Fatmata was just 13 when she had her first child, and by 2021 she was in desperate financial need, and decided to travel. She had to suspend her nurse training in Sierra Leone, and the agent promised her that she would be able to continue doing that in Lebanon. She recounts, "The mister came to pick me up from the airport. I told him I didn't come to do housework, and he said I had signed a contract to do so. I said there is no contract I signed. Because I quarrelled, they took me to the office of Ali, who is the head of all of this programme there. He talks to Sierra Leone people here and brings us to work there. He said if I won't work, they will kill me and no one will know where I am. I know my situation back home, so I had no choice. So I decided to work."

Alice says she hit the ground running, and within minutes of reaching the household she was put to work, unmindful of the long journey and wait at the airport. She says she was "slapped and flogged" by the 'madam' every time she complained until she refused to work. She was then taken to "the office". When she was returned to the office after the third unsuccessful placement – as she refused to continue working without pay, "they locked me in the office prison — they have prison in the office. For three days they give me no food, no water. When they pulled me out I could not walk, they had to drag me off the floor I was on," she recalls. She does not recall the name of the office – "everything is in Arabic", but remembers the agent was called Joseph.

Sarah, a 21-year-old, worked in the house of her first employer for less than two weeks. The work quickly affected her, "My hands," she held out her palms. "They even do an operation on my hand. When I went there, the way I was working, they put a lot of chemicals in the water that I used to wash dishes. When I told her the problem, the lady did not bother. They didn't give me gloves, nothing... I don't eat on time. I wake up; I wake up at 5 am;

I go to bed at 12 am.” She stopped working and insisted they take her to the hospital.

*“So I noticed that they are calling somebody. That was my first day to know that I have another agent in Lebanon that has an office. They take me to that office. I explained to them what was happening to me. And I said I cannot work with the people anymore, because of what I am going through.”*

The office demanded she pay US\$1000 if she wanted to go back home, if not they would place her in a different house. After taking her to the hospital and treating her chemical burn, she was deployed to the house of a couple who were vacationing in Lebanon. She shares: “I worked for two months and then they sent me back to the office. So I asked them, what about my salary that I worked for two months? They said they have already paid the money to my master in the office.” She threatened the agent in the office, a man called Kofi, that she would record her testimony and put it on social media if they didn’t pay her. They paid her US\$400 for the two months, but soon after locked her up in a room in the office without water or food as a punishment.

Marian, 29, was told she would work in sales in Beirut. Her elder sister helped her raise the money for the programme, so she could travel in 2018. After a week, she told her employer that this was not the work she wanted to do, as she was promised a job in the supermarket on an 8-hour shift with Sundays off and US\$300 as salary.

“The madam called someone by the name of Mohamad. He’s a Lebanese and she told me, ‘This is your agent.’ I never knew I have an agent in Lebanon and I have an agent in Sierra Leone here. So the guy came over and he said, ‘What is your problem? Are you a drama queen?’ “ When she said she wanted to go back home, he demanded US\$2000. “I’ve never seen a hundred-dollar note leave alone US\$2000.”

After a few more months of non-payment, Marian refused to work again. “Madam called the same agent again. He came and slapped me. I dropped on the ground and started crying. I said, ‘I want to go back. The agent took my clothes [off] and started beating me.” Mohamed, the agent, took her to the office on his bike and locked her up in a room on a Friday. “It was something like an abandoned kitchen inside this office. He locked me

up there along with another Nigerian girl. We were not given food, but a passerby gave us bread and water through the window.” Monday morning, the agent came along with his wife, who convinced her that there was another house she could work in and they would treat her well.

Many of the women who were taken to the offices shared that the operations were often run by couples, and each partner played a role. One threatened and the other pleaded, one starved them and the other gave them food.

For this 24-year-old, the trauma at the employer’s home was compounded by the trauma at the agency. “I worked for a very big family, and there was this small child who slapped me. When I asked why, the father pulled a gun on me. I was terrified for my life. Then they called the office of the agent, Jaffer, who took me and kept me in the office for a week.” In that one week, he attempted several times to have sex with her, she says.

“The madam was the owner of the office and her husband wanted to rape me. So I begged her to give me another job and she took me to take her of a her mother. I stayed there a long time. During Corona when I was very sick, and asked to go to the hospital, they just gave me panadol and water. I felt I would die if I continued.”

As noted in these testimonies, many of the women who wanted to leave their jobs faced various threats and restrictions, including having to pay back recruitment fees paid by employers or by Lebanese agents, threats of agents inflicting violence and abuse, withholding wages, locking them up, or losing their legal residency status. These practices present many of the key elements and indicators of Forced Labour. Many recruitment agencies that have been accused of subjecting workers to abuse, forced labour, and trafficking continue to operate to this day. The Lebanese government has failed so far to take necessary action to investigate allegations and blacklist those agencies.



*“‘This is your agent.’ I never knew I have an agent in Lebanon ... “*

# REPATRIATION AND REINTEGRATION

The women featured in this report, along with many others who left their homes in pursuit of better economic prospects, have found themselves ensnared in the Kafala system. The exploitation and mistreatment they endured have profoundly affected their physical and mental health. The degrading treatment they experienced, combined with their isolation from families, exposure to violence, and racial discrimination, has severely impacted their overall well-being.

Many of the Sierra Leonean women in Lebanon are often reluctant to return home due to the fear of rejection from their families and wider community. MWA believes that an important part of the prevention of human trafficking and labour exploitation is ensuring an investment in the reintegration of MDWs returning to their home countries.

## SHAME AND STIGMA

With many workers being denied access to communication, the families that are left behind are often in the dark about the employers' address and contact details and the well-being of the women who have migrated. All of the mothers who travelled left behind young children, as young as a few months and not older than 8 or 9 years of age. The children are left in the care of aunts and grandparents, occasionally the fathers. When women fail to meet their financial goals, they grapple with not just the trauma of abusive employment but shame at having returned empty-handed and in debt.

For example, as Marian told MWA:

*“When I came back, I just tried to put myself together. And because it was a lot of shame, because family were expecting a lot. Because they think, ‘Ah, this one, she has travelled to overseas. She has come back, she has money, everything should be okay.’ Looking at my appearance, you would tell that I’m not fine. I have to stay far away from my family so that they will not ask me. Even my sister that I left my daughter with I met after a month, I have worked on myself, taken care of myself. That is the time I have the mind to face them, tell them that I have come back.*”

Talking about having left her child she adds: “well, if everything went well, I think I would not have regretted anything. Me going to Lebanon, I would not regret, because I would be capable to take care of her, give her a good life, send her to the school that I wanted, make sure she has everything she wants. But since things did not go well, I regretted it.”

In a shop under construction in Makeni, Mohammed sets aside his carpentry tools to have a quick word about his wife, who was in Tripoli. She had worked for three different employers since 2021, and her last employer was good, he says: “Now there is a fight in Tripoli, so they took her to the office. Her employer said once the fight is over, she will bring her back. But she doesn’t want to come back. She is scared of what society will say. She has no money, she wants to stay till 2026. There will be side talk, you know?”

Mohammed was unable to take care of his 9-year-old son and has left him with his mother. He is now focused on buying land and building on it, and asks if there was a programme he could take, “perhaps to Dubai?”

Fatmata who returned in 2023, unlike many others, refused to give up the fight. She had paid her neighbour Margaret Leone 15mn (~US\$1500). She shares, “When I came back, I took Margaret to the police. My agreement was that I would work as a nurse. Because all my savings were gone, even the land I sold, and now I have no money, no land. So I asked her for my money.” She finally got back 5mn(~US\$500) but had to fight for it for 6 months.

But many of the returnees hesitate to go back to their families immediately. They stay with friends, as Sierra Leone does not yet have a shelter for victims of trafficking. Recently, a fund has been set up to tackle trafficking in person, but its execution is still pending.

Demoh came back to Sierra Leone after a harrowing experience in Lebanon during which period she had also lost her child. “After I came back, I was stressed. I was ashamed to go back to my house. I stayed at Waterloo, at my friend’s place. My mom asked me to come back. I said I’m ashamed. I lost my baby and I make no money. I come back empty.”

Ramatu’s mother had passed away when she was still abroad, and her kids had to be taken care of by her uncle. “When I met them they were not good. Because I had not sent money home. When I came back the situation was too much. They were shaming me for not bringing anything. They said I am crazy. My children, they treat me good. Right now, I am suffering. To take

care of my children. I have a big issue. Husband left me because I didn't bring anything."

Despite the hardships and threats, 19-year-old Marcia does not want to return to Sierra Leone. "I have only Leone 9mn (~US\$400) at home, that's all. I want to go [back], but my biggest problem is that my parents are dead. So I have no one to take care of me." Her sister, who is 25, listens in, looking stricken, but is not able to provide her any comfort. "Even if I come back, I will find another programme for another country, like in Europe."

All interviewees had little recourse when leaving these abusive working conditions. The findings from the interviews with returnee MDWs and with organisations that provide reintegration support highlighted the importance of mental wellbeing and psychosocial assistance for survivors of abuse.

## **ADVOCACY AND ADVICE**

While neither Lebanon nor Sierra Leone provide the psychosocial support needed for the victims of forced labour and trafficking, several survivors reach deep into their own trauma to advocate for change and advise those who wish to go.

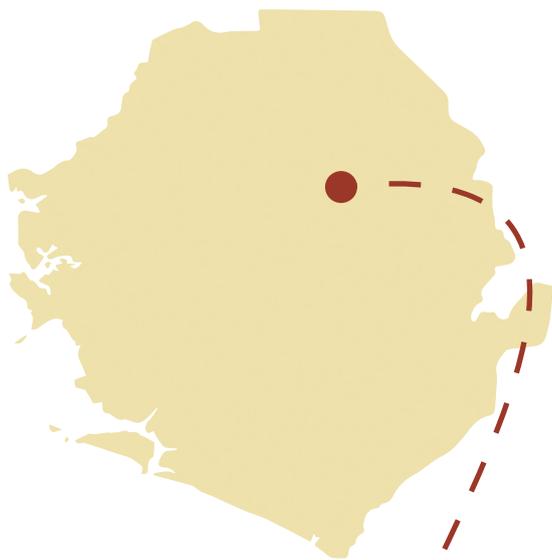
Marian had not been paid for months, and did not have her identity documents, but that did not stop her from fighting for herself and others. "I ran away and was asked to reach out to the president of the Sierra Leonean Committee. So he took me to an apartment where there were eight other Sierra Leoneans." She used the little money she saved up to cover her expenses and started advocating online for their return, she says, "We found who were all available to share their story, to come online, through voice message, or through video call. And we send the message to the government that we need help." Finally, in October 2020, she and 50 others returned to Sierra Leone.

Marian continues her sensitisation work on TikTok. She has 5000 followers and says some of her posts have received over 40,000 likes. "I tell them that if you want to travel to Lebanon, go through the ministry. Maybe it's better for you. Maybe you will be secure. Maybe someone will be there to check on you if you are doing well. I will not tell them not to go, but you have to be prepared."

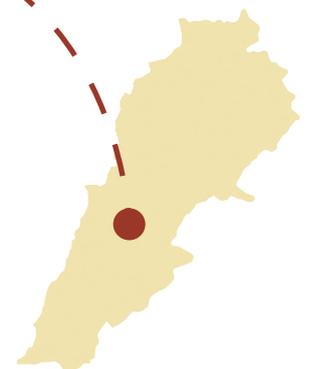
Not all are willing to advise people against migrating.

Hawanatu says, “I don’t give people advice, I give them proof. The scars are on me. After I ran away from the last abusive employer I lived with Sierra Leonean sisters. We went to the market one day, some of the Lebanese started chasing us. A car hit me. My leg and back broke. My friend’s arm broke.”

But she does have strong words for the government. “The only thing I want to say to the government is to stop this. Because Lebanon is not safe, especially for Sierra Leonean. They are not treating us like a human being. They treat us like a slave. My advice to fellow Africans, it is very important to do research. It’s very necessary for you to have information about that country. Because when you make a decision without knowing nothing. Sometimes you fall into the wrong trap. As for me, I fall into the wrong trap and it’s a legacy I would tell my kids because it’s all written in my body right now. So I just need to advise anyone, If you want to travel, you need to find so much information on whatever country you want to go. It’s very important. If I know back then that Lebanon is that kind of country, I won’t try it. I won’t go.”



***“If I know back then that Lebanon is that kind of country, I won’t try it. I won’t go.”***



## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The economic environment in both Sierra Leone and Lebanon is of concern. However, of far graver concern is the continuing recruitment of domestic workers to Lebanon without any mechanism to carry out due diligence on the employer's ability to accommodate and pay for the service of migrant domestic workers.

By all accounts, the recruitment agencies at destination are not monitored or regulated, except to serve the needs of the employers. The ease with which workers are moved from household to household, without proper documentation, and the practice of confiscating passports at the airport itself goes against international legal obligations Lebanon is a party to.

The capacity for the Lebanese government to implement meaningful reforms is likely limited; the country is struggling to address a deep economic crisis, marked by currency collapse and widespread poverty. Despite international aid efforts, the government's ability to provide basic services and stability is limited. Nonetheless, the reforms suggested are essential to securing workers rights and should remain the focus of advocacy efforts.

In Sierra Leone, the free movement between the 15 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) makes it difficult to effectively monitor borders through which women are transported and flown out without checking their contract or visa. While this may be a more difficult impediment to overcome, a regional ECOWAS initiative may serve better, as many of the West African nations send workers to the Arab region.

The recommendations that follow are addressed to the states. But there is a pressing need to engage with individuals on both ends of the migration corridor.

At origin, communities and potential migrants need to be educated on their rights and sensitised on possible challenges they may encounter. One way of doing this is by tapping into community leaders and survivors and empowering them with resources to lead these conversations. While it is ideal to push for individuals to seek viable job opportunities locally instead of investment in a job abroad, this report recognises the aspirational nature of all migration and it behoves the stakeholders in this process to eliminate the factors that lead to exploitation.

At destination, advocacy for legal reforms and their enforcement by authorities should be a priority of the Lebanese government. Additionally, advocacy with employers of domestic workers must underscore that hiring a domestic worker is a responsibility not a right, and that domestic work is work and must be fairly compensated. Though Lebanon has a fairly vibrant civil society, and many organisations that work on migrant workers' rights, we have not seen these advocacy and activism yielding any tangible impact or legislative change. A rethinking of how advocacy is done is a pressing need.

## **TO THE GOVERNMENT OF SIERRA LEONE**

- ▶ Appoint consular officials of Sierra Leonean origin and strengthen consular assistance to provide protection and support to MDWs subjected to abusive situations. This should include temporary accommodation provision and support for repatriation and a Labour Attache.
- ▶ Labour Attaches must be tasked with the independent and clear responsibility of protecting the rights of their citizens in destination, which may include registering them on arrival, reviewing and attesting employment contracts, and monitoring recruitment agents.
- ▶ Provide extensive training and orientation for Labour Attaches and other diplomats who are to be deployed to destination.
- ▶ Investigate allegations of exploitation and abuse by consulate staff.
- ▶ While bilateral agreements (BLA) can have a limited impact on the well-being of workers, it does help establish minimum standards of employment. To that end, finalise a BLA with Lebanon that includes minimum referral wages, suggestions for labour inspection of employers and recruitment agents, and make it mandatory for workers to be in possession of their communication device.
- ▶ Initiate pre-decision orientation at the community level to sensitise communities and individuals to the opportunities and challenges of labour migration. This process must be ongoing and continuous before the idea of migration takes root.
- ▶ Establish independent pre-departure training for workers who have received job offers abroad.
- ▶ Better regulate facilities that provide pre-departure medical checks.

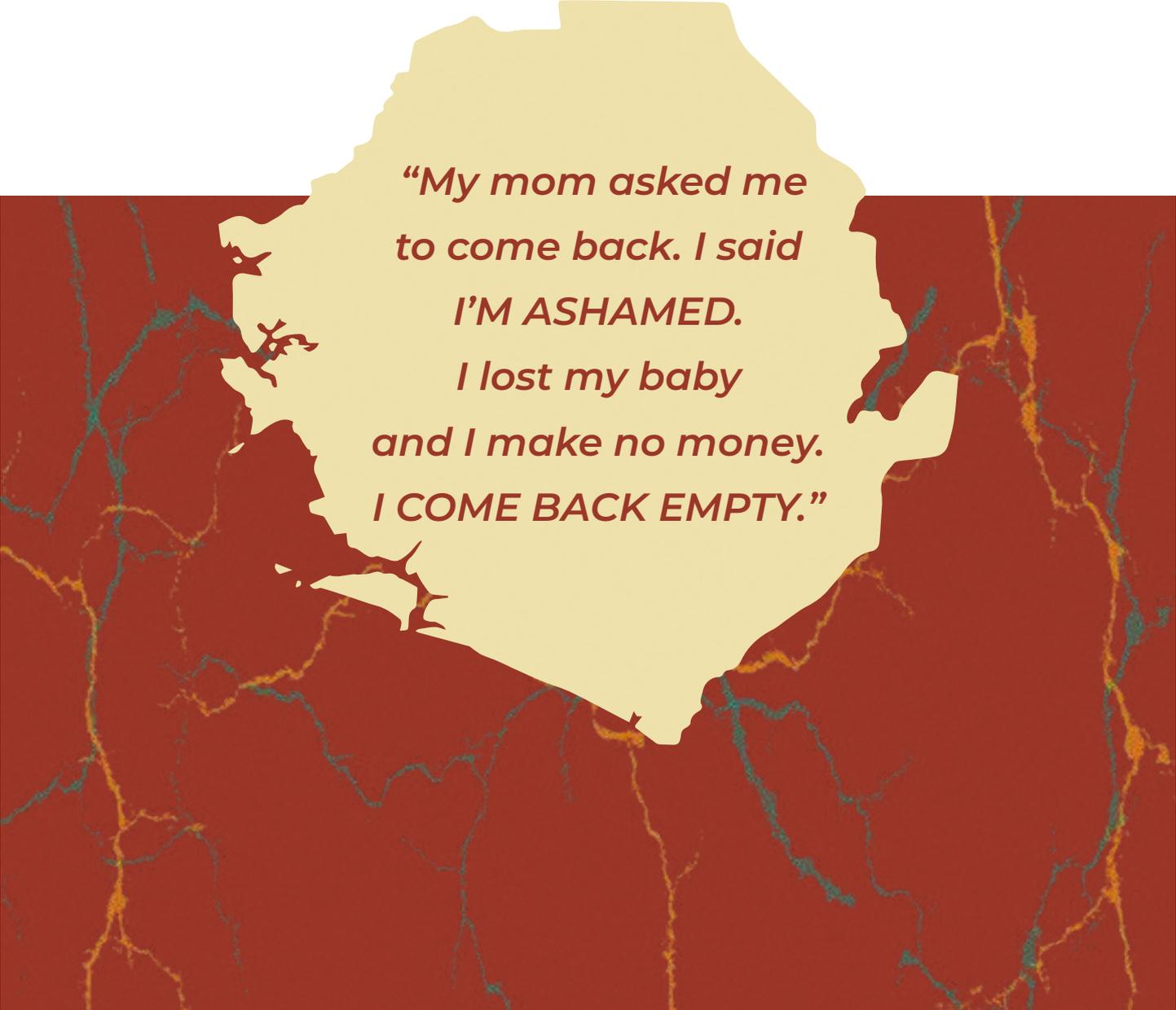
- ▶ Ensure workers sign contracts at home, and this contract is the same as what should be attested by the Sierra Leone mission in destination.
- ▶ Set up shelters in the mission at destination.
- ▶ Establishing shelters to receive workers who are repatriated in distress.
- ▶ Introduce insurance and pension schemes for workers going abroad by including them in the social protection agenda as listed under Sierra Leone's Medium-Term National Development Plan 2024 – 30.
- ▶ Create processes that allow workers and local recruitment agents to connect with agents and employers abroad pre-departure.
- ▶ Strengthen data collection on trafficking and forced labour cases.
- ▶ Strengthen mental health services specifically catering to returning migrants.

## **TO THE GOVERNMENT OF LEBANON**

- ▶ Abolish the Kafala system in its entirety and include domestic workers under its national Labour Law.
- ▶ Decriminalise absconding charges.
- ▶ Set up safehouses and temporary accommodations for domestic workers, allowing workers to leave and return at will.
- ▶ Register migrants on arrival and establish regular follow-ups in lieu of onsite labour inspection.
- ▶ Regularly inspect and monitor the premises of recruitment agencies and hold recruitment agencies with illegal or abusive practices accountable.
- ▶ Suspend or cancel licences of agencies that have a record of exploitative practices.
- ▶ Agency offices to hold workers on the premises between employment contracts or when they return from an employer. These premises need to meet decent living standards and be regulated.
- ▶ Discontinue the practice of confiscating passports and handing them over to the employer. The passports must be in possession of the workers.
- ▶ Carry out due diligence on employers who apply for domestic

workers visas. This should include proof of individuals' financial ability to pay workers regularly and that the household has appropriate accommodation.

- ▶ Do not permit recruitment for employers who have a proven track record of abuse and prevent them from recruiting workers.
- ▶ Introduce and make mandatory digital payment of salaries.
- ▶ The standard contract must clearly state the nature of the job, expected task, hours of work, leave entitlement, etc.
- ▶ Conduct public information campaigns on employer obligations, recruitment regulations, and the benefits of treating workers fairly.



*“My mom asked me  
to come back. I said  
I’M ASHAMED.  
I lost my baby  
and I make no money.  
I COME BACK EMPTY.”*



Migrant  
Workers'  
Action