

MAPPING HER JOURNEY:

Documenting Widespread Issues Affecting Sierra Leonean Domestic Workers in Oman Using Primary, Real-Time and Near Real-Time Data



SEPTEMBER 2022



Do Bold

September 2022

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Produced by Do Bold.

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Do Bold did not receive any funding to research and/or write this report. The graphic design and rights to use the artwork were funded by a private donor.

Cover artwork by Hawa-Jane Bangura

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the participation of Sierra Leonean women in Oman. We are grateful for their courage and determination to share their stories with us and the very personal and detailed information that you will read in this report.

We are extremely grateful for the collaboration with Mr Ibrahim V. Kondoh, Former Minister Plenipotentiary and Head of Chancery from the Sierra Leone Embassy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, who has played a key role in the repatriation of Sierra Leonean victims of human trafficking and forced labour from Oman throughout his appointment and continuing to do so. A special thank you to Migrant-Rights.Org for the significant support provided from the beginning and throughout the project.

We would also like to thank everyone that played a key role in supporting the Sierra Leonean women, us, and the project: the dedicated staff of our travel agency, who cooperated and supported us throughout the period of this project, including weekends and outside working hours; our two teams of volunteers on the ground in Muscat who have aided in the repatriation process; the Sierra Leonean volunteers who helped us with the multiple requests that we could not have responded to without them; to the Omani community that helped us clarify answers to questions about employment practices; the hospital that helped process pre-travel PCR tests for the women we supported; our nurse who has helped the community with health questions and advice; our Arabic translator who helped us translate the vast number of documents and negotiations with employers; the Rain Collective for co-organising a three-month crowdfunding campaign to support this group of women; the Domestic Workers Advocacy Network's Lucy Turay for organising women returning from Oman and supporting them with economic opportunities; and to World Hope International-Sierra Leone for partnering with us for reintegration referrals and supporting these women in Sierra Leone. Our further gratitude to the many individual donors and collaborating organisations and businesses, including Leap Loves Green, who supported the repatriation of these women.

A very special thank you to everyone that has worked to make this report happen. This includes James Lynch of the human rights research and advocacy organisation FairSquare Projects and Migrant-Rights.Org, who reviewed parts of this report, as well as the data analysts, editors, and Arabic translators. Also, we would like to extend our gratitude to the donor that supported the design of this report and the possibility of including artwork from a Sierra Leonean woman artist.

And last but not least, to all the team at Do Bold who has made the project "Freedom for Our Sisters" possible and the women's plight visible through this report, thank you.

Sincerely,

Ekaterina Porras Sivolobova
Founder & Director, Do Bold

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Domestic workers are one of the communities least protected by existing laws and one of the most vulnerable to exploitation in the world. We have documented an array of systemic and widespread abusive practices against Sierra Leonean women domestic workers in Oman that begin in the recruitment process and continue in their host country.

This report identifies widespread abusive practices, policy gaps, and questions the effectiveness of current systems. Throughout a 22 month project, we organised 656 Sierra Leonean women domestic workers into one community, had conversations with 390 women, received 621 survey entries and verified 469 of these surveys.¹ In this research, we document a thriving human trafficking business and widespread, normalised and accepted practices that indicate forced labour.

We identified 468 out of 469 (99.8%) women as victims of human trafficking, women who reported experiences consistent with human trafficking as defined by the Palermo Protocol. In addition, the vast majority of women reported working conditions consistent with forced labour indicators. We found that most Sierra Leonean women domestic workers experienced deceptive recruitment (78%), long working hours (80% worked between 16 and 20 hours a day and 99% had no day off), restriction of movement (91%), and discrimination (77%). More than half of them experienced wage theft (60%) and physical abuse (57%) and approximately one-third of them experienced sexual abuse (27%).

“ To our knowledge, this research has created one of the largest data sets on domestic workers in the Gulf, and it is the first to investigate the journey of a woman migrant domestic worker from recruitment to repatriation using real-time and near real-time data (RT & NRT data). We also believe that this study is the first to combine research with support activities on the ground, revealing and addressing human trafficking, forced labour and other forms of abuse among Sierra Leoneans in Oman, and demonstrating the positive impact of justice-based interventions.

This report exposes, accurately and meaningfully, the harsh realities of the lives of domestic workers to those who have the power to change systems, policies and practices. We intend to spotlight the stories of these women, as told by them, to remind us that there are real lives and countless untold stories behind these numbers and percentages.

The efforts and impacts of this project have been highlighted on a podcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation (**BBC**) and in an article by **The Guardian**. The project was also a finalist for the **2021 .Org Impact Awards**, and has been named a finalist project for the **World Justice Challenge 2022** under the Access to Justice category.

¹ Community size and the number of conversations as of March 14, 2022, and survey entries and verified surveys as of August 3, 2022.

Other challenges we shed light on include the problems that come with “absconding”² charges, paying “release money”, and the inability of workers to access a grievance mechanism or other protective measures. This report also details the migration process from the drivers of migration and recruitment process in Sierra Leone, to working and living experiences in Oman, to the repatriation process - including during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, it details the process by which the vast majority of these women became trapped in Oman, unable to seek redress, support or remedy for the wrongdoings perpetrated against them.

Our findings also shed light on the conflict between policies and efforts to address human trafficking. A prime example of this conflict is the relationship between “absconding” charges and forced labour: if the requirement for employers to file “absconding” charges continues to be enforced, forced labour will prevail and identification of victims of human trafficking will continue to be hindered. In addition, the findings show the interconnectedness of issues, for example: how grievance mechanisms are only effective when they are accessible to all - regardless of legal status. And while we also found positive efforts to prevent and address these issues, such efforts are still minimal.

Through the analysis of our findings, we make 23 recommendations for strengthening, improving, abolishing, or putting in place policies and systems to prevent and address human trafficking and forced labour. These are directed to both the governments of Oman and Sierra Leone. Recognising the complexity of these social problems, we have considered how these intersect with issues of fundamental rights, inequality and discrimination, gender-based violence and migration. The recommendations listed try to address root causes and system gaps identified with the aim that meaningful change will take place.

ABOUT US

Do Bold is a not-for-profit organisation working in the Gulf countries since 2013. Our work on-the-ground helps improve the lives of migrant workers so they can focus on thriving – not just surviving. We address issues that are systemic and affect those most vulnerable. We empower communities and support workers to access justice and remedy.

Our mission is to advance human rights, human dignity and decent work for all migrant workers. Our vision is a sustainable world where all workers are treated justly and equally, and have access to justice, remedy, and opportunities to thrive. We solve complex and dynamic problems affecting workers by harnessing powerful data to improve systems and workers’ lives. We work with both the affected community and decision-makers to achieve worker-centred outcomes.

² We have put absconding in quotation marks as it is an illegitimate offence and it is not our terminology. Absconding is often associated with leaving secretly to avoid responsibility for a wrong act committed. According to the Cambridge-Dictionary it is “to go away suddenly and secretly because you have stolen something, usually money” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/absconding> Accessed on August 3, 2022. We do not believe that leaving your employer because of exploitative working conditions or inhumane living conditions constitutes “absconding”.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report sheds light on the individual and collective experiences of Sierra Leonean women migrant domestic workers from their recruitment in Sierra Leone, through their work experience in Oman and, in some cases, their eventual repatriation back to Sierra Leone. In this report, you will hear the women recount their experiences in their own words, as well as an analysis of our overall findings.

The report is based on the work from our project “Freedom for Our Sisters”, which started in October 2020 and focused on a community of 656 Sierra Leonean women, the vast majority of whom were trafficked into domestic servitude in Oman.³ We spent 22 months interviewing and surveying hundreds of women while also spending countless hours identifying victims of trafficking and exploitation, providing support, making referrals and analysing data.

Our findings are based on research, engagement with governments and different government entities, monitoring of grievance, accountability systems and government responses, the assistance provided to victims of human trafficking or exploitation, one-on-one conversations with 390 women, and a verified survey of 469 women.

Because of our extensive engagement with this community, we have uncovered a depth of issues faced by Sierra Leonean domestic workers in Oman that had not been previously reported on. Through this report, we hope to capture these important details and provide a thorough understanding of the interconnectedness of issues and how to prevent and/or remedy them. All the women referred to in this report are Sierra Leonean, although we have also provided support for women and men of other nationalities in Oman.

1.1 Domestic Workers in Oman

According to the National Centre for Statistics & Information of Oman (2019), the Sultanate of Oman’s domestic work sector employs around 158,537 migrant women domestic workers, excluding those that are undocumented. Most come from the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Ethiopia.

Because of structural systems and widespread unethical practices, migrant domestic workers are often victims of human rights abuses such as forced labour, wage theft, and physical abuse. The domestic work sector is not well regulated, and provisions of the kafala or sponsorship system - a set of laws governing migrant workers’ immigration and legal residence in the region - provide unbalanced power favouring the employer over the domestic worker. Grievance mechanisms are not accessible, not functional, or flawed in their response. Access to justice is beyond the reach of domestic workers, and holding accountable those responsible for wrongdoings is rarely seen. These situations leave domestic workers unprotected and highly vulnerable. Another hindrance to providing protection and support to domestic workers in Oman is that it is considered a country with repressed civic space, meaning that civil society is significantly constrained and therefore migrant workers have little to no support from civil society.⁴

³As of August 3, 2022

⁴“Monitor CIVICUS.” <https://monitor.civicus.org/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2021.

1.2 Legal Framework

To understand the legal context, we considered the laws, decrees, or ministerial orders that cover the domestic work sector, ratification of different relevant international conventions and domestic violence legislation in Oman, and anti-human trafficking efforts in the country.

Domestic work regulation and domestic workers' protection

In Oman, the labour law does not cover domestic workers, excluding them from fundamental rights and resulting in a higher risk of exploitation. The only legal instruments regulating domestic work are 1) a three-page ministerial decree (Ministerial Order No. 189 of 2004 concerning the rules and conditions on the employment of domestic workers) stating the rights and responsibilities of employers and domestic workers, 2) the standard domestic worker's contract (2011) regulating the relationship between employer and domestic worker, and the working and living conditions of the latter, and 3) Ministerial Decision No. 1/2011, which regulates the agencies involved in the recruitment of domestic workers.

Basic protections from which domestic workers are excluded from are minimum wage, maximum working hours, rest periods, overtime paid, annual leave, end of service benefits and health insurance.

Anti-human trafficking legislation and efforts

In 2008, Oman adopted an Anti-Trafficking Law by a Royal Decree.⁵ The law prohibits all forms of trafficking and mentions punishments of 7 to 15 years of imprisonment and financial fines for those held accountable. However, conviction rates are low, and the tendency is to focus on sex trafficking rather than labour trafficking. For example, between 2019 and March 2022, there were no prosecutions for forced labour, including domestic servitude.⁶

Oman also adopted a National Action Plan against Human Trafficking and established a National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking to apply the Law to Combat Human Trafficking. In 2017, the Council of Ministers authorised a Rapid Action Taskforce to combat human trafficking that went into effect in early 2021. In 2020, the Royal Oman Police, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a dedicated counter-trafficking unit in persons to combat human trafficking and respond to relevant human trafficking reports.

Data available on human trafficking and modern slavery

We found limited relevant information on human trafficking, modern slavery and forced labour from sources from the U.S. Department of State, the Global Organized Crime Index and the Modern Slavery Index. Data available on human trafficking in Oman remains limited, with the primary data source being the annual Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report by the U.S. Department of State. According to the 2022 TIP report, in the reporting period, Oman (Tier 2), did not identify any victims of forced labour. They did identify 16 people as victims of trafficking, 14 of whom

⁵ "Royal Decree No 126 / 2008 Anti-Trafficking Law - ILO." <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/81766/92282/F1786958440/OMN81766%202.pdf>. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.

⁶ "2022 Trafficking in Persons Report - United States Department of State." <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/>. Accessed 6 Aug. 2022.

were victims of sex trafficking and two victims of forced begging.⁷ In this reporting period, same as in the previous year “the government did not identify any foreign victims of forced labor, including domestic servitude” and “the government did not investigate, prosecute or, for the fourth consecutive year, convict any traffickers of forced labour of migrant workers, including domestic servitude”.⁸

According to the Global Organized Crime Index, “Criminal employment agencies and foreign actors are prevalent in the human trafficking trade. The human trafficking networks are seemingly diffused across the entire country and extend beyond Oman to connect with local agents in trafficking victims’ countries of origin. Low-level state-embedded actors in Oman’s criminal markets seem to be corrupt and complicit law enforcement officials, security personnel and airport officials who allow traffickers to move people into the country through legal access points.”⁹

Regarding modern slavery, the Modern Slavery Index estimated an absolute number of 9,000 victims from a population of 4.2 million, with an estimated prevalence of 2.1 (2.1 victims per 1,000 people).¹⁰ The Arab States (GCC countries, Lebanon and Jordan) was rated as the second most vulnerable region for modern slavery, with government response as the main weakness.

The government response is rated from highest A to lowest D. Oman is rated as CCC while Sierra Leone is rated B.

Other than these, there is no representative data on the prevalence of forced labour or human trafficking in Oman.

Country ratifications for international conventions and protocols

Oman ratified the ILO Forced Labour Convention C029 in 1998; ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, C105 in 2005; ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, C182 in 2001; and the accession in 2005 to the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol).

Oman has not signed or ratified the Slavery Convention 1926; the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, P029; the UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery; or the ILO Convention 189, the Domestic Workers Convention.

Programs to protect migrant workers

In 2010, Oman established an ILO Decent Work Country Program (DWCP) for government officials to receive technical assistance related to the protection of migrant workers. From our understanding, the programme ran from 2010 to 2016, then it was extended from 2018 to 2020. However, it is not clear to us whether the domestic work sector is being prioritised in this programme since, in its latest report, domestic workers are not mentioned.¹¹

⁷ Tier 2 refers to “Countries whose governments do not fully meet the TVPA’s minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.” 2022 Trafficking in Persons Report - United States Department of State.” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/>. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

⁸ “2022 Trafficking in Persons Report - United States Department of State.” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/>. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

⁹ “Criminality in Oman - The Organized Crime Index.” <https://ocindex.net/country/oman>. Accessed 19 May. 2022.

¹⁰ “Global Slavery Index.” <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/>. Accessed 19 May. 2022.

¹¹ “The Oman Decent Work Country Programme (2018-2020) - ILO.” https://www.ilo.org/beirut/country/WCMS_656565/lang-en/index.htm. Accessed 19 May. 2022.

Domestic violence legislation

Regarding protecting women, including women domestic workers, from violence, Oman has no specific legislation on domestic violence to protect women from any form of violence nor any other mechanism for women to access protection and ensure prosecution.¹²

1.3 The COVID-19 Pandemic

Although this report is not focused on the effects of the pandemic on women domestic workers, it is important to mention the additional and exasperating issues this community faced because of it. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights violations and the abuse of women domestic workers in Oman increased.

The onset of the pandemic and subsequent closing of schools and requiring public and private sector workers to stay home forced a large number of families in Oman to stay at home.¹³ Through conversations with this group of women, women reported increased working hours as well as increased discrimination. Some women reported being told that they were virus carriers and to stay away. In one case, an employer called the police to keep a domestic worker away (see also **Threats, abuse, harassment and violence**).

An increase in wage theft during the pandemic was indicated anecdotally from conversations with the women who reported that employers told them they could not pay their salary since they had lost their jobs or had their salaries reduced.

The response of different entities in the context of the pandemic also shed light on systemic gaps. For instance, women domestic workers were detained in closed quarters without public health precautions. At some point, the Ministry of Labour began prohibiting unvaccinated individuals from entering its offices.¹⁴ This meant that those who needed the most support from the Ministry of Labour could not access it as most of the women from this group were unvaccinated.¹⁵ There are also reports of Ministry offices being completely closed to the public because of COVID infections among their staff. The vaccination efforts were prioritised first for medical staff and the elderly, followed by young Omani citizens, and in April 2021, vaccines were available for all other nationalities.

As for repatriations, the COVID-19 pandemic brought extra regulations for travellers to Sierra Leone, and flights often were cancelled. All travellers had to take a PCR test within 72 hours before travelling and pay 800,000 SLL (approximately US\$70) online and in advance for a 'Health Declaration' and PCR test on arrival in Sierra Leone. This extra expense, although understandable given the circumstances, is an insurmountable barrier for victims of human trafficking. Furthermore, this community has limited knowledge of how to submit applications online and the women do not have credit cards available to make payments online.

¹² <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/country%20report/asia/oman/oman%20cedaw%20co.pdf?vs=141> Accessed 22 Feb. 2022

¹³ "The role of children and adolescents in the transmission of SARS" <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1876034121002689>. Accessed 3 Mar. 2022.

¹⁴ We do not know the exact date this regulation went into effect but ancillary data indicates it was in October 2021.

¹⁵ Oman started vaccinations on 28/12/2020. By June 2021 only 8.5% of the population in Oman was vaccinated. By October 2021 the vaccination rates for at least 1st dose peaked at 60% of the population. https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=OWID_WRL

Also, the periodic closing of borders/airports and the introduction of stricter measures from countries where the flights from Oman to Sierra Leone would stop over meant that flight options were limited and often led to more expensive flights. For example, Morocco, a popular transit point for flights to Freetown, closed to all international flights from November 27, 2021 to February 7, 2022. Besides these practical barriers to repatriation, we have also documented employers telling their workers that “the airport is closed”, when the airport was open as a reason not to purchase return tickets for workers who had completed their contracts, although employers are legally required to purchase these according to Omani law.¹⁶

1.4 Background: “Freedom for Our Sisters” Project

The “Freedom for Our Sisters” project was created to address the needs of the group of Sierra Leonean women identified as victims of trafficking and forced labour and to promote systemic change to address and prevent human trafficking and exploitation. From October 2020 to the present, Do Bold has created an online community of 656 Sierra Leonean women domestic workers in Oman, talking to them to understand their experiences and share their stories, collecting first-hand, RT & NRT data to identify root causes, systemic gaps and widespread practices, and providing remedy (see [Do Bold's efforts to support victims of human trafficking and forced labour](#)).

2. METHODOLOGY

The objective of the Freedom for Our Sisters project was to support Sierra Leonean women victims of human trafficking or exploitation and to identify the gaps within different systems that allowed these issues to arise. For this, we carried out rigorous research, engaged with government entities, monitored grievance and accountability systems and government response, and collected RT & NRT data.

Real-time (RT) data empowered us to respond quickly as we understood the problems as they were happening, and near real-time (NRT) data helped us to record a snapshot of historical data as it existed in the recent past.¹⁷ Up to date, we have engaged with a total of 656 women in this project. From these 656 women, we have received survey responses from 621 women, verified 469 from these surveys and engaged in one-on-one conversations with 390 women.¹⁸ The report findings are based on the 469 verified survey responses and from the 390 one-on-one conversations.

Before requesting participants to fill out the survey for data collection, we explained to them its purpose. The survey and conversations were conducted in English and all researchers were female. In the stories and comments cited, we have opted to withhold the domestic workers’

¹⁶ Article 6, Ministry of Manpower, Ministerial Decree, 189/2004, On labour rules and conditions for domestic employees

¹⁷ For more information on RT & NRT Data refer to: <https://www.sigmacomputing.com/blog/real-time-data-vs-near-time-data/> and https://www.splunk.com/en_us/data-insider/what-is-real-time-data.html

¹⁸ Community size and the number of conversations as of March 14, 2022, and survey entries and verified surveys as of August 3, 2022.

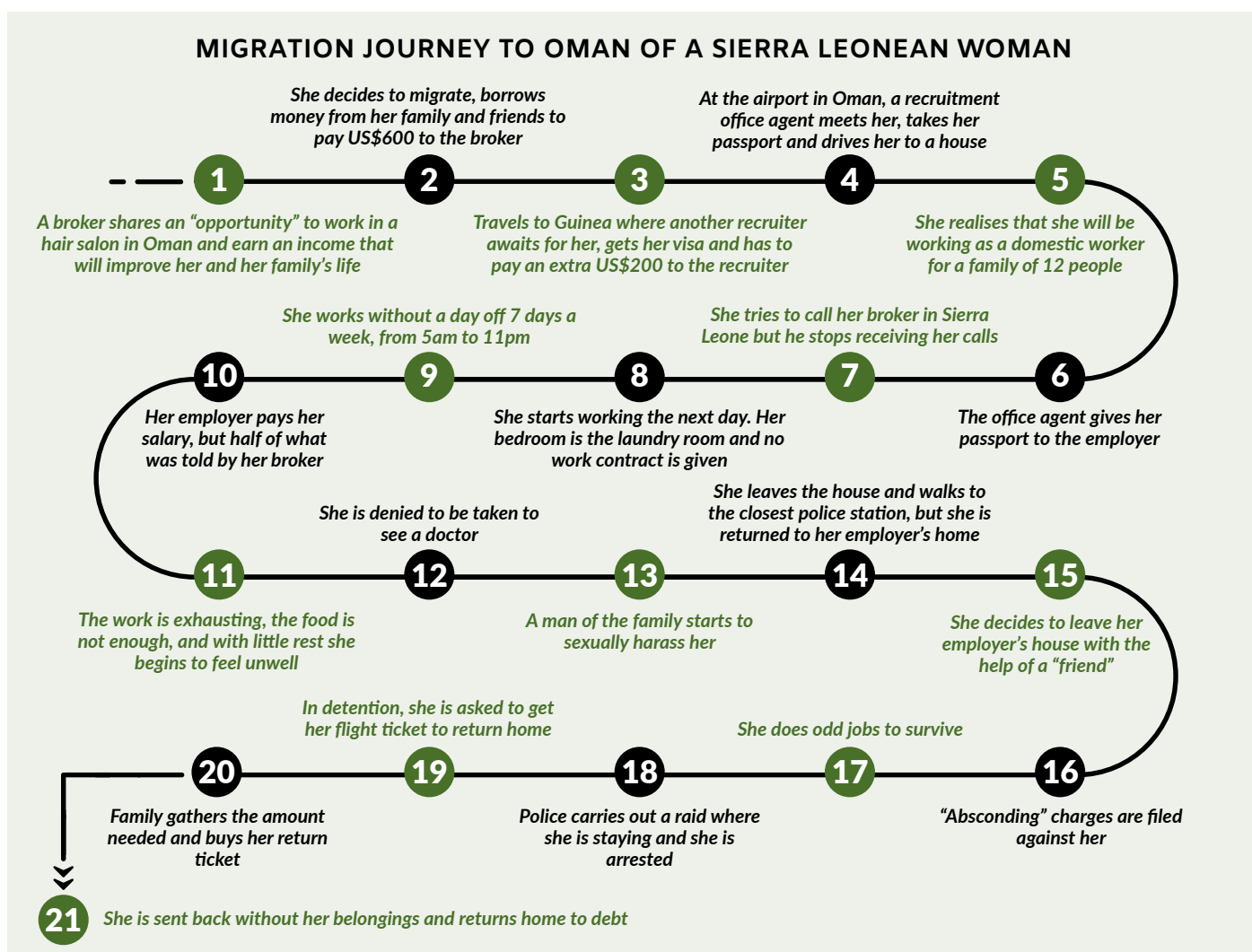
names and any other identifying details for their safety and to protect their identity. We have received consent from all women whose stories are shared in this report.

2.1 Project Framework

As a framework, we focused on the complete migration cycle of the Sierra Leonean women migrant domestic workers from recruitment to the arrival back in Sierra Leone. We examined reasons for migrating, recruitment, working and living conditions, repatriation and, to some extent, reintegration.

We used the following indicators and guidelines to identify victims of human trafficking, forced labour, and a set of human rights principles that cover the journey of a migrant worker from the following sources:

- » The operational indicators of trafficking of human beings by the ILO
- » The indicators from the ILO’s Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour
- » The Human Trafficking Statistical Definitions, Prevalence Reduction on Innovation Forum, July 2020 (PRIF)
- » The Dhaka Principles for Migration with Dignity (the “Dhaka Principles”)



2.2 Sources of Data and Documented Knowledge

This report is based on extensive investigations and monitoring, rigorous research, and deep knowledge of the context of migrant workers in the Gulf countries. The report's findings are based on RT & NRT data and documented knowledge. The RT & NRT data has been obtained from a verified, tailored and very detailed survey of 649 women, one-on-one conversations with 390 women, and the evidence collected and analysed from October 2020 to August 2022 from Sierra Leonean women domestic workers in Oman.¹⁹ We have gathered the documented knowledge from our research on the ground, engagements with different government entities, monitoring of grievance and accountability systems and the direct assistance provided to this group of women victims of human trafficking, exploitation or other forms of abuse.

DOMESTIC WORKERS

Survey

For the project, we launched two surveys: an initial survey to define variables, and a second survey that contained questions tailored to this group and was accessible to those who were not able to read or write. The initial survey includes 135 data entries and the second survey includes 621 data entries from which 469 are verified.²³

The survey helped capture high-level indications of potential human trafficking or forced labour. Through the survey, we collected general information related to the recruitment process, working conditions and current conditions, as well as more detailed information such as information about the recruiter, recruitment fees paid and source of this money, detailed information on working hours, sleeping arrangements, access to internet, and types of violence, experienced, among others. Survey participants could also submit photographs, videos, and audio clips.

Conversations

We knew that a survey alone would not capture all the elements and details that are woven into and between issues affecting women domestic workers. It was also important to have conversations to hear the stories as told and experienced by the women directly, to confirm

¹⁹ As of March 2022, this is the number of women from Sierra Leone for whom we have conversation notes in our database.

²⁰ As March 6, 2022.

²¹ Data entries as of August 3, 2022.

²² As of August 3, 2022.

²³ As of August 3, 2022.



A community of

656

Sierra Leonean women in Oman²⁰

621

Survey entries²¹

469

Verified survey entries

390

In-depth conversations

22

Months of research, provision of remedy and support²²

whether they were victims of trafficking or other forms of exploitation or abuse, to understand the support that they needed, and to capture other details that often go unnoticed. Conversations took place over periods ranging from a few days to as long as 10 months. whether they were victims of trafficking or other forms of exploitation or abuse, to understand the support that they needed, and to capture other details that often go unnoticed. Conversations took place over periods ranging from a few days to as long as 10 months.

Our approach is to have victim-lead conversations, rather than interviews. In these conversations, women articulate their primary concerns or struggles. Many of these conversations go into further detail, thus capturing issues that often are not shared through interviews, such as the deeper reasons for staying in or leaving abusive employer relationships, their dreams and hopes and details of physical and sexual abuse. We also use conversations to assess vulnerabilities, which was important given the large number of women requesting support and the limited resources available.

All engagements with the women took place via WhatsApp or via phone, the most accessible and easy-to-use mediums for the women. We held the conversations mainly via voice notes because of the inability of most of the women to read and write. The purpose of using WhatsApp (versus in-person conversations) was not only because of COVID-19 restrictions but also because many of these women are not accessible in-person as they are inside their employer's home or in their recruitment office. So, regardless of COVID-19, they would not have been reachable through any other means.

EMPLOYERS AND RECRUITMENT OFFICES IN OMAN

We also had conversations regarding the cases of at least 36 women with employers and staff from recruitment offices. These conversations took place when a woman was under their sponsorship and wanted to return home. These efforts helped us, in particular, to better understand the gaps in the system that keep a domestic worker in situations that can be considered **Forced labour**.

GOVERNMENTS

We held extensive conversations with government officials from both Oman and Sierra Leone. Throughout the project, we worked with the Embassy of Sierra Leone in Saudi Arabia. We also spoke to and coordinated with different government agencies in Oman to provide support to Sierra Leonean women, including, for example, police officers in different detention centres across Oman, and the Ministry of Labour.

MONITORING

We monitored grievance and accountability systems and government responses in different situations to understand what was accessible for the women who needed support in Oman. We tried to access, or guided the women to access directly, all the grievance mechanisms in the country and documented the process and response. Police raids, detention and deportation processes were also documented.

SECONDARY SOURCES

We conducted thorough research and analysis of relevant laws, decrees, policies, circulars and documents in Oman in English and, when necessary, in Arabic. For Sierra Leone our secondary research included: the National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (2021-2023), the Sierra Leone Labour Migration Policy, the National Review Report of the Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration in Sierra Leone, and the National Migration Policy for Sierra Leone. A review of other secondary sources also supported this research, such as trafficking in-person reports, Universal Periodic Reviews and reports from NGOs and other institutions.

2.3 Methodology used for Verifications and Calculations

Verification of Survey

The information submitted through the survey by the community was verified before being used in this report. The verification process helped to validate the information submitted and thus the information analysed. It included the deletion of data entries that were not relevant (entries of men, people of other nationalities or people in a different destination country) or duplicates. After this verification process, some answers to specific questions were further analysed for incongruences and comprehension. If answers were not congruent (e.g. she stated that she arrived in Oman after the date she filled out the survey) only the incongruent answers were omitted from the analysis. This was also the case for missing survey items: only that answer was excluded and the rest of the survey was retained. As a result of the verification and analysis process, a different sample size was used for each finding and, unless mentioned otherwise, the sample size used is the complete verified survey sample of 469 women.

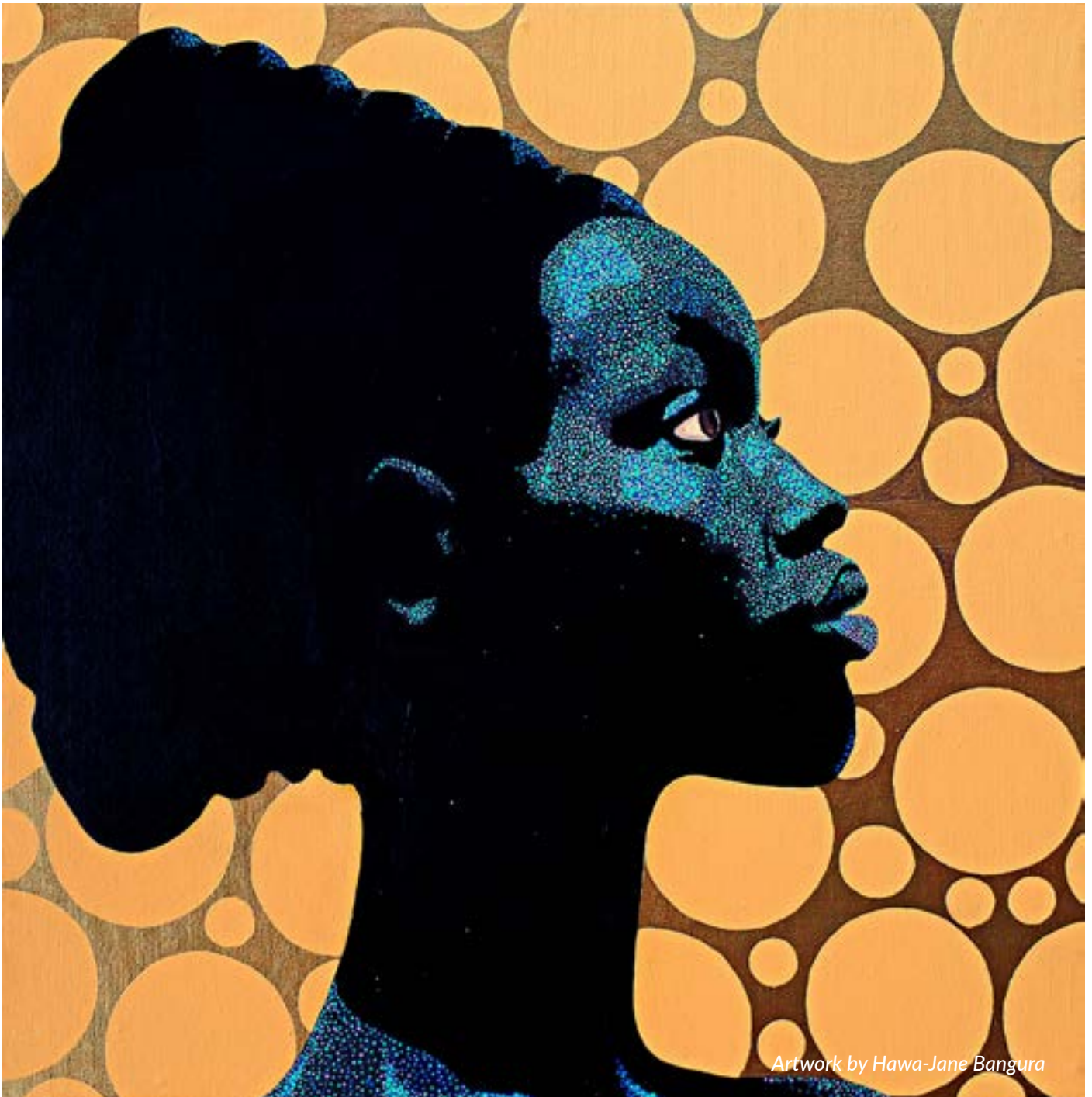
Prevalence of Human Trafficking Calculation²⁴

For identifying the prevalence of human trafficking, we used the guidelines set forth by the Human Trafficking Statistical Definitions: Prevalence Reduction Innovation Forum, July 2020 (PRIF). According to these guidelines, a person can be identified as a victim of trafficking if he or she is found in any of three scenarios that are a combination between “medium” and “strong” indicators in different categories. For this calculation we have surveyed two groups of women: 1) those that were, at the time of the survey, still engaged in labour services for their visa sponsor, recruitment office, or with a new employer placed by the office staff (24%) and 2) those who had left their employer (76%). Since we were analysing a sample with both those currently experiencing indicators and those who had recently experienced indicators, we calculated the prevalence using both the calculation for “Sex Trafficking, or Forced Labour, Adult, Flow” and the calculation for “Sex Trafficking, or Forced Labour, Adult, Stock”.

²⁴ “HUMANTRAFFICKING STATISTICAL DEFINITIONS.” <https://www.aha.org/system/files/media/file/2020/08/PRIF-Statistical-Definitions-Documents-8-3.pdf>. Accessed 6 Aug. 2022.

3. STORIES THAT MATTER

We have included three different stories to remind us how issues are interlinked and woven into each other - to understand that no issue stands alone - and to bring forward domestic workers' voices, something that we do not hear enough of.



Artwork by Hawa-Jane Bangura

3.1 Mariama's* Story

(*This report uses pseudonyms for all the domestic workers and others mentioned and withholds names for in the interest of their privacy and security)

Mariama's Story looks at a range of issues that often affect victims of human trafficking. It highlights deception and recruitment fees in Sierra Leone, and exploitation in Oman. It also sheds light on the treatment often faced by domestic workers in the recruitment offices and how "release money" plays a crucial role in keeping victims in exploitative situations.

"You will make a lot of money in Oman as a hairdresser", a recruiter in Sierra Leone told Mariama. Mariama had recently lost her father, the family's main breadwinner.

“ Mariama, you know how to plait hair. Don't sit here. Here they will give you small money. Go to Oman. When you go in Oman, they will pay you plenty money.' This is the way he made me to come in this country. Now, if I message, he will not respond to me.”

There were just a few things the 24-year-old had to do to travel: one was to get a passport that falsely stated she was three years older than she was. And another was to **pay her recruiter** the equivalent of US\$500, money her mother paid on her behalf.

When she arrived in Oman, Mariama began working in an employer's home as a domestic worker. There, she was given a room to sleep and enjoyed some level of privacy as her employer never searched her belongings. But they did not give her **access to Wi-Fi** and would sometimes take her phone away. She was not allowed to leave the house by herself.

Mariama worked **19 hours a day**, from 4 am to 11 pm every day, seven days a week. She had to work when she was tired or sick and they **refused to take her to the doctor** when she asked to go. She worked for a family of 12 in a compound with a large two-story house that had 10 rooms and 10 bathrooms. Her tasks included cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, ironing, washing the car, gardening, and taking care of children and elderly members of the household. They **did not give her enough food**, "I only eat because I cook for them", she said.

After 8 months, Mariama couldn't take it anymore. They had not paid her in two months and she asked to return to the recruiting office that brought her to Oman.

In the office, she told the agent that **she was lied to** -that being a domestic worker was not what she was promised. She told him she wanted to go home and refused to work. He then **beat her** and locked her in a room without food or drinking water for a week.

The office agent then told Mariama that if she wanted to leave, **her family needed to send money** for her ticket and she needed to spend her salary on a COVID test.

“ I said...my family doesn't have that kind of money. If I have that kind of money to buy a ticket so that I will go home, I should not come [to Oman] to find money. Because I don't have that kind of money, that's why I come here.”

A Sierra Leonean who worked in the office and acted as a translator between local Sierra Leonean languages and English told her it would be better for her to work than stay in the office, stating that if she stayed in the office they **wouldn't provide her with food or drinking water.**

So she went to work for another family, which was actually the home of her agent. For several months, Mariama negotiated with him whenever she could, insisting that she needed to go home. Her agent was not consistent in his communications - telling her in one conversation that the airport was closed because of COVID, then saying that she could leave if her family bought her a ticket, before announcing to her that she must stay for two years, then once again telling her she could leave after Ramadan, then telling her he would buy her ticket if she worked just 6 more months - always changing his story when she got close to fulfilling his requirements.

“ The last time I said I want to go, he said go and work. After airport open [he] will make me to leave. Now, airport is [open] so I want to leave. My condition is not good. I am not well. I am not used [to] this kind of job.... This job is not the kind of job I do in my country.”

In December 2020, she reached out to Do Bold for the first time, saying a friend gave her our phone number. She said she was “suffering” and “not OK”. She kept in touch periodically, reaching out when it seemed like her agent would let her leave before going quiet again, when he changed his mind.

In her agent's house, her health kept deteriorating - she had a toothache and a large abscess on her face. Mariama grew more desperate. Her brother back in Sierra Leone tried to intervene, but the office ignored his messages. Desperate to get home, she considered **leaving her employer**, wondering if that would make it easier for her to leave the country. With information from Do Bold about the legal ramifications of leaving the office - such as being charged with “absconding”, becoming vulnerable to arrest, and staying trapped without the possibility of leaving - she decided to stay and kept negotiating.

On April 1, her boss said she could leave and that we should message him to arrange her ticket. But, when we messaged him stating that we were the friends who wanted to buy her a ticket home, he became aggressive.

“ Don't [make] problems otherwise i will take you to [police],” he wrote on WhatsApp. Then came a voice note: “Don't talk to her again, I will take you to jail, you know. I will take you to police. Don't talk with her again. Never. Ok? Don't make problem.” He followed up seconds later, with a written message saying he would make a police complaint against us if she told him we talked to her again. “You lis[t]en,” he wrote.

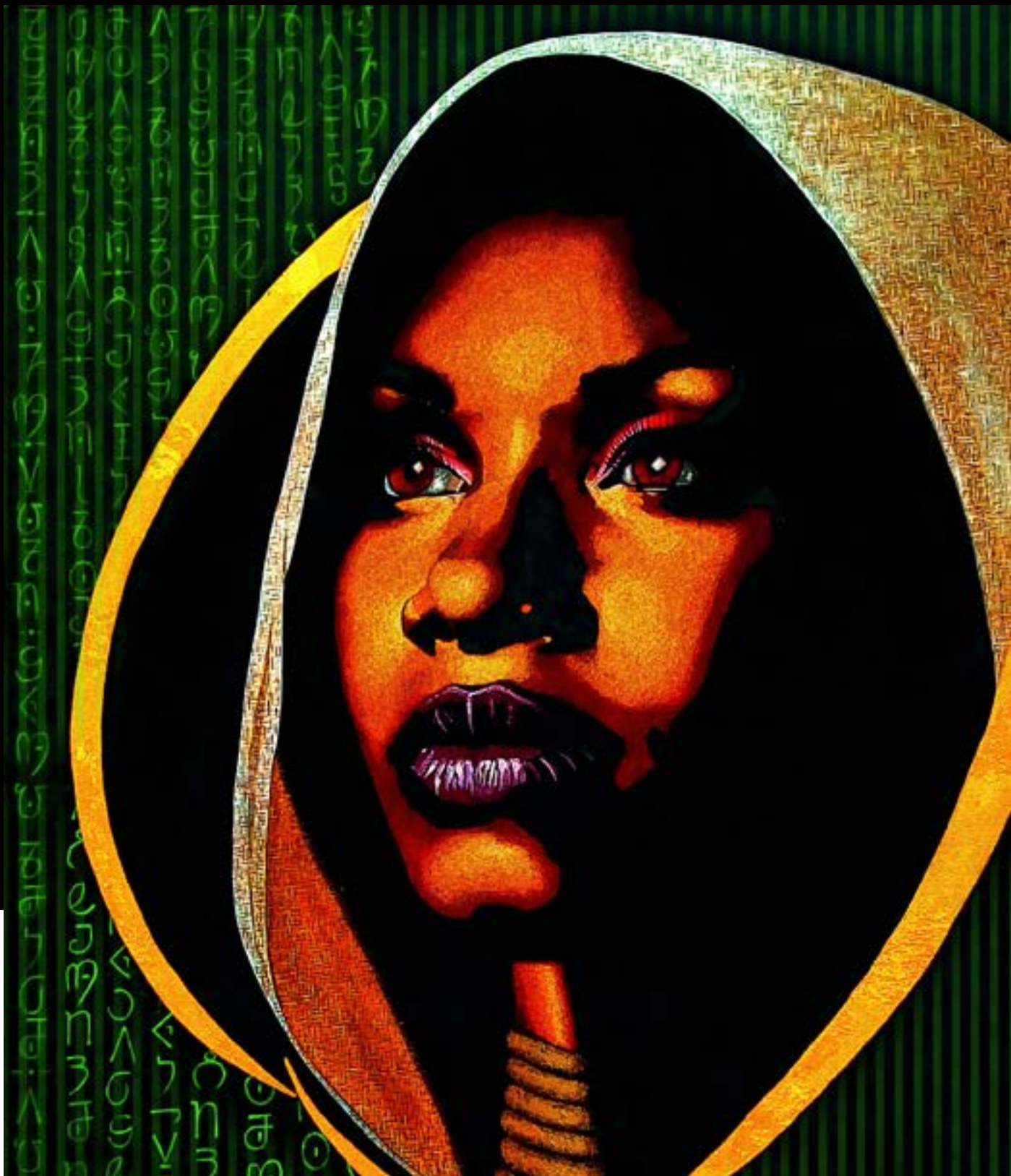
18 days later, he changed his mind, brought her from his house to the office and told her she could leave. After ensuring that Mariama had enough money on hand to pay for her pre-departure PCR test, we coordinated with him to ensure he took her for the test, completed the departure paperwork, and brought her to the airport on time.

He dropped her off but, while she was at the airport, her flight was cancelled.

Coordinating late at night with Mariama, her brother, her office agent and our travel agent, we re-booked her on a flight for 28 hours later. Compounding the complexity, Mariama didn't have phone credit, which meant she couldn't reach out to anyone - she could only receive phone calls.

With her agent's home hours from the airport, Do Bold arranged for her to stay in the home of a local volunteer. But, with a COVID curfew in place, the volunteer couldn't reach her until the next morning. Her agent wouldn't accept this and sent her to stay with a friend of his, a situation that made everyone nervous as she was now with a stranger.

We stayed in touch through phone calls as the next 24 hours unfolded. Eventually, Mariama was taken back to the airport and boarded the first of three flights home.



3.2 Aisha's* Story

Aisha's Story looks at issues often present in recruitment offices in Oman. It highlights how recruiting offices are exploiting domestic workers and are not held responsible for the repatriation of domestic workers if a medical exam is failed, nor are they held accountable for wage theft and exploitation.

Aisha's mother and father died, leaving her and her 10-year-old sister on their own. More than anything, Aisha wanted her younger sister to go to school.²⁵ One day, a neighbour told her about her uncle who helped people work abroad. She told her stories about people her uncle helped who had now made a lot of money and could build houses and gain various possessions. She told her she was sharing this information with Aisha because she felt pity for her. Aisha decided to pursue this opportunity, and the neighbour introduced her to her uncle, Emmanuel*. Emmanuel lived in her city and his boss, Sayid*, in the capital, Freetown.

He told her she would **make US\$500 a month** as a domestic worker in Baghdad, Iraq. After 2-3 months, they would increase her salary to US\$600 a month. To go, **she had to pay US\$1,000** for documents, a medical test, a visa and a ticket. Aisha decided to go so she could make money and send it back for her sister's education.

To raise the money to pay Emmanuel, she worked odd jobs. She saved US\$300 and also asked her mosque to help - the members contributed money and gave her US\$300. With US\$600, her recruiter said that would be enough and they began processing her paperwork. They told Aisha to tell the passport office that she was 24 years old. At her actual age, 22, she might have been considered too young to get a visa, they said. Aisha was also taken for a medical exam, which she passed.

Then Aisha was on her way. She left her sister with her neighbour and planned to send money back every month for them to take care of her.

Aisha first travelled **to neighbouring Guinea**, where she stayed for 17 days before receiving her visa and air ticket. She believed she was on her way to Iraq.²⁶ In January 2021, she landed in Oman.

“ I called [my recruiter] ... I said, ‘I did not say I would come to this country. You told me you would [send me to] Baghdad. And now I’m in Oman,’” she said. “When I messaged him, he would not reply me. When I call him, he would not pick [up] my call again. He don’t care about me again ... I spent my money without no good information. The agent duped me. He ‘ate’ my money. He lied to me.”

In Oman, Aisha was taken to a recruitment office. She asked questions and explained this was not the country she paid to come to.

“ The office agent told her, “If you don’t want to work, pay me the money I spent for you.’ I said, ‘Which money? I spent money. Call the agent and ask him.”

The office agent told her that her salary would be 80 Omani rials, the equivalent of US\$208, nearly US\$300 less a month than the wage she had been promised. With no money to return, Aisha was placed with an employer and began working.

²⁵ Although primary education is officially free in Sierra Leone, Aisha reports that students will be asked by teachers for incidental fees for books, uniforms, etc. Additionally, the family must pay for daily expenses such as transportation and lunch (though Sierra Leone has plans for a free school lunch program, reports and our conversations indicate it has not yet been successfully rolled out). Refer to <https://www.devex.com/news/sierra-leone-s-plans-to-improve-education-one-meal-at-a-time-96371>

²⁶ Iraq does not use the Kafala visa system, which is used in all Gulf countries, Lebanon and Jordan.

She cleaned, cooked and ironed in her employer's house in the morning and in his mother's house in the afternoon. **She worked 18 hours a day** (from 5 am to 11 pm), every day. After 27 days, her employer took her for the mandatory medical test needed to finalise her visa. **She failed**. Unable to secure her visa, the employer returned her to the office.

The office agent told Aisha **she must give her the money she 'spent' on her** and pay for her own ticket back. When Aisha was unable to, **the office agent sent her to work short-term in people's homes**. She told her to tell anyone who asked why she was working short term that she had passed her medical exam but was working in different houses while her sponsor travelled.

The agent told Aisha that, within three weeks, she would earn enough for a ticket. After three weeks, Aisha returned to the office with her wages in hand, but **the agent kept her wages** and continued to ask her for ticket money. They sent her to work again for two weeks and, again, kept her wages. When there was no short-term work for her, Aisha spent days in the office and they made her pay for food.

After her second short-term placement, Aisha got in touch with Do Bold. She told us her story, and the story of two other Sierra Leonean women who were in that office with her, both of whom had been recruited by the same two people in Sierra Leone, and both of whom also failed their medical test.

Without money to send home for her sister's education and basic necessities, Aisha was sick with worry, afraid that her sister would resort to begging for food and then be taken advantage of by 'wicked' men.

“ I left my sister in Sierra Leone to come and find money, because of her, because I need my sister to [get an education.] Now I came here, I don't have the money. ... Now, he asked me to give the ticket money. If I have the ticket money he will [let me go]. I don't have money. I don't have any money now. Please, ma, help me.”

Do Bold communicated with the office on behalf of Aisha and her friends. They agreed to release the women if we provided the tickets. Within two weeks, Aisha and her two friends were on home soil.²⁷

Each one received a **“Soft Landing Kit”**, US\$120 to help with basic resettlement expenses. Aisha used hers to buy food, necessary personal items, and to pay her sister's school fees. But, with the money we gave her running out, and having used all her savings to pay to go to Oman, Aisha soon fell into despair.

“ I need you to help me, to catch [this man for me]. Now, I don't have anything ... Now, since yesterday, although I'm really happy [to be home], I started thinking, 'If this money finish ... who will give me money again?'" she said. "Because no one-no one-will help you. Because they will say, "Ah! You went to Arab country. You didn't bring money?' They will start to laugh at me, mock me.”

²⁷Do Bold has since repatriated another worker from this same office who failed her medical test.

Determined to get justice, Aisha provided Do Bold with detailed information about her recruiters, **which we passed along to the Government of Sierra Leone**. She also took the information to the police in her town. They detained her trafficker but refused to arrest him unless Aisha paid.

“ If you are poor, they don't take your case seriously,” she said. “Because that guy have money, they [let him go]. They say I don't have rights...What can I do because I don't have money to give them [and he] gave them money. Because I don't have money, this is the way they treat me. [...] They don't care about me. They give me wrong. Then they gave the man right. They made me feel bad. That day I cried all day.”

The neighbour who originally told her about Emmanuel now avoids her whenever she sees her.

Seven months after returning, Aisha is in a city closer to the capital working as a cleaner for approximately US\$30 a week. Her sister is staying in a village with their aunt and attending school.



Artwork by Hawa-Jane Bangura

3.3 Fatmata's* Story

Fatmata's Story looks at issues in the kafala system that leave a worker trapped and unable to return home. It also highlights deception in recruitment, recruitment fees, wage theft, extremely long working hours and inhumane working conditions.

Fatmata* says she came to Oman to “find a better means of survival for me and my family.” To come to Oman, she borrowed US\$1,000 from her family and **paid it to a recruiter** who told her he had a 6-month job for her working in a supermarket and making the equivalent of US\$450 a month.

However, when she arrived in February 2020, Fatmata was taken straight to a home where she was told she would work as a live-in domestic worker under a two-year agreement. **Finding herself in a vastly different situation than she expected**, Fatmata cried for four days after she arrived. So, the employer took her back to the recruitment office. After staying in the office for a few days, she was sent to another family's house to work.

In that house, Fatmata **worked from 5:30 am until 11:45 pm** (18.25 hours/day) with one 30-45 minute break. She worked without a day off, cleaning, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, and taking care of a young child. She also took care of two elderly women. Her tasks included dressing the women and changing their diapers. **She was not given her own place to sleep**, so she slept outside the room where the elderly women slept.

“ I was called a slave and [told I] should only work like a slave,” she said.

After a month, Fatmata received her salary. But it was only 75 Omani Rials per month (approximately US\$195) -- after she complained about the **treatment in the house** and asked to return to the office, **they started paying her 70 Omani Rials** (approximately US\$182) -- 40% of what her recruiter in Sierra Leone had promised.

Periodically, **the employers would search Fatmata’s belongings, take away her phone** or disconnect her from the home’s Wi-Fi. Fatmata’s employers did not provide her with adequate food. And, if Fatmata wanted to buy things for herself, she had to give money to someone in the employer’s family to make the purchase for her but they would tell her all the stores were closed.

“ In the morning and in the night, I don’t know what I’m eating. ... [I] normally hide to eat or will not eat when [I] am around because they did not want to give me their food.”

If she was tired or not feeling well, Fatmata could not refuse to work. She began losing weight and also developed a rash. When she showed it to the employers they **did not take her for medical treatment**, so Fatmata treated it herself with a natural remedy of lime and salt.

“ This is the first time when I came to Oman -- see my condition,” Fatmata said, showing a photo of herself with a full face and round cheeks. “As I started work in that house, my condition was changed, like this”, she said showing a photo of herself with a rash, much slimmer face and sunken cheeks.

Seeking support, Fatmata messaged her recruiter in Sierra Leone to ask to return home.

“ From the time I cry, I said ‘I want to go back home,’ the agent told me that when I finish 6 months, I will go back home. He told me about that. I said, ‘ok.’ Because they will told me that the money they will spend for us to come is 6 months, when 6 months finish the money has finished on me, so they will make me go back home.”

Her agent in Sierra Leone also discouraged Fatmata from asking the office to change employers before she had been with her current employer for 6 months.²⁸ When she reached the 6-month

²⁸This information from the recruiter is incorrect, as procedures for domestic workers involved 2-year obligations. 6 months refers to the trial period an office will give to a sponsor which allows sponsors to get a refund on the fees they paid to the office if they return the worker within 6 months (by law the trial period is three months). Generally, it is more difficult for a worker to return to the office after 6 months because, at that time, the office often does not refund the employer’s deposit and therefore the sponsor may refuse to take the worker back. Alternatively, the office may refuse to take back the worker since the trial period is over. Though we cannot be sure why Fatmata’s recruiter gave her this misinformation, an educated guess would lead us to believe that he did so in order for her to be forced to stay with her current employer.

mark, Fatmata contacted the office in Oman. She was surprised to learn that they discouraged her from returning, telling her the office was 'closed' and that **if she returned they would lock her in a room and not give her food.**

“ I said, ‘Oh now I’m suffering in this place. Please remove me here I want to go back home or you go and find me somewhere to work.’ They refuse.”

After 6 ½ months with her employer, Fatmata felt she could not stay any longer, so she asked a friend for help. Her friend **helped her leave the house** by providing a taxi, giving her a place to stay and helping her find a place to work. However, every time Fatmata went to new places to work, **the employers didn't pay Fatmata** when she had completed the job. Soon, the friend she was staying with began asking Fatmata to pay for food, rent and the taxi that she had used to leave her sponsor's house.

In late 2020, the Government of Oman opened an **amnesty** period for workers who had left their employer, allowing them to leave the country. Fatmata was eager to register. However, the friend who helped her leave the house told her that if she wanted to register for amnesty, she should pay 50 Omani Rials to “join the amnesty group.” Fatmata could never save up this money, so she never paid it.

Then, she got in contact with Do Bold who provided this support for free. However, when we tried to help her register using the online portal, we received a message saying she could not because her employer/sponsor had not filed “absconding” charges against her. To try to address this issue, Fatmata went to the **Ministry of Labour** office in Muscat. She provided them with her passport number but was not given any new information.

“ So now, I don't know what to do, ma, because now I'm very sad.”

We advised her that the next best step would be to **speak with her sponsor** or office and make arrangements with them directly. Fatmata then called her office boss many times over several days, but they never responded to her. She does not have the phone number for her sponsor, so she could not contact him directly.

“ Up till now, they will not respond to me. I messaged them they will not respond,” she said several weeks after first messaging her office boss. “So I don't know what you have to do for me now because me too I want to go. Me too I want to go back home.”

Fatmata was worried about a language barrier with the office boss, so Do Bold sent a message to him in Arabic. Read receipts show that he played the voice message the same day we sent it, but he never responded, nor did he respond to the follow-up message we sent eight days later (which read receipts also show that he listened to the day we sent it).

Many of Fatmata’s friends had been able to register for amnesty and return home, which reduced her safety net. She was having difficulty sleeping and feeling even more desperate to leave. Some of her friends were also caught up in **police raids** on buildings where African migrant workers lived.

“ My friend told me that anyone that they catch, now you will go to jail for 6 months jail or your family from your country will send you ticket money ... that is the law, that is what my friend told me.²⁹... Only my body in this country, but all my heart my soul, I want to go back home.”

Fatmata continued waiting. When the Government of Oman opened another amnesty period in November 2021, Fatmata tried to register again. But the answer was the same - her sponsor had not made a case against her so she could not register. She messaged her sponsor again over the course of several days but, as of this writing, she has not received a response.

For the next steps, Do Bold recommended Fatmata to go to the Ministry of Labour. However, as of December 2021, proof of a COVID-19 vaccine is required to enter the Ministry and Fatmata is not vaccinated. In addition, it is still uncertain whether, if she goes to the Ministry of Labour, any support can be provided.

At the time of writing this report, her situation is still not resolved.

“ I don’t know what I have to do now because, me, I want to go back home.”

4. FINDINGS

This section documents all the findings from our project “Freedom For Our Sisters”, following the journey of a domestic worker migrating to Oman from Sierra Leone and returning home. Our research revealed the extent and types of abuse experienced by Sierra Leonean domestic workers in Oman, and identified gaps in government policy as well as widespread practices that allow these issues to exist and thrive.

4.1 Demographics, Reasons for Migrating, and Migration Routes

We received verified survey responses from 469 Sierra Leonean women, the majority (94%) of whom migrated to Oman between 2019 and 2021.³⁰ All women were between the ages of 17 and 43 but the majority were between 23 and 32 (88%) (born between 1990 and 1999) at the time they filled out the survey. Of those surveyed, 76% had left their employer and were “outside”, 12% were working with their employer and 2% were in an office.

²⁹ Although this information is not completely accurate, we share it here to highlight the information vacuum/spread of misinformation. It is not correct that they will be jailed for 6 months, but it is accurate that often the family has to pay for the flight ticket.

³⁰ Note that from early 2019 to April 30th 2021, Sierra Leone had a ban on recruitment of Sierra Leoneans to work abroad.

According to the latest information from the Government of Sierra Leone, the number of Sierra Leoneans in Oman is estimated to be approximately 4,335 as of October 2021.³¹ As such, our verified surveys may have covered a sample size of 11%.

REASONS FOR MIGRATING

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world with an average income of US\$1.40 a day based on data from the year 2020.³² This group of women had limited economic opportunities in their home country as a result of the current economic situation in Sierra Leone: economic growth is extremely volatile, which limits job creation and stability. According to the World Bank Database, 50% of the national income is attributable to only 20% of the population and thus has only a limited effect on poverty reduction and employment generation.³³ One-third of the working-age population is not employed, especially women.³⁴ And when employed, the gender gap in earnings and wages shows that men earn three times as much as women.³⁵

“ The reason why I live my country to come and work in Oman is that I came from a poor family so I come here for me to work and provide for my family and my children I come from a family of ten and I and d [sic] eldest I was once a student but my parents couldn't afford to pay for me and my siblings so I drop out of school to learn tailoring so that I can be able to put food on table my two parents have carry age so what I get at from the tailoring I feel [feed] my family but since corona virus come to our country no more work and we were going through a lot in time of food cloth shelter etc so that give me d cause to live my country and come to work in Oman so that I will be able to provide for my family”

From the 469 verified surveys, the main reasons for migration were:³⁶

To generate income for self-support (to work, find money, further their education, start a business upon return, or build a house) - 47%

To generate income for self-support and family - 26% - including

» Securing a better education for their children now or in the future

While Sierra Leone rolled out a free education program in 2018, anecdotal reports and an analysis of the 2020 School Census report³⁷ indicate that parents are still asked for significant financial contributions for their children's education.

³¹ Information received via a letter dated on May 19th from the Government of Sierra Leone.

³² "GDP growth (annual %) - World Bank Data." <https://data.worldbank.org/share/widget?indicators=NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>. Accessed 20 May, 2022.

³³ World Bank Database, 2016 looking at the Gini coefficient.

³⁴ "Sierra-Leone-Jobs-Diagnostic.pdf - World Bank Document." <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29028/Sierra-Leone-Jobs-Diagnostic.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>. Accessed 10 February, 2022.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ The survey did not limit the participants' answers and allowed them to write in different reasons for the purpose(s) that drove them to leave their home country. A trend in the answers was observed, which was combined for three main purposes. Some individuals provided more than one reason for migration.

³⁷ Free education in Sierra Leone – a lot done, yet much more to do, <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/free-education-in-sierra-leone-a-lot-done-yet-much-more-to-do/> Accessed 6 Mar, 2022.

- » Paying for ongoing medical care for a chronically ill family member

Only children under five and pregnant and nursing mothers have access to free health insurance. All others must pay for their healthcare out-of-pocket, including the bribes often required to access care,³⁸ constituting a large financial burden for many Sierra Leoneans.

Limited opportunities at home, poverty and hardships - 24%

Important elements to highlight, contributing to migration to Oman, is the loss of the main family provider (a parent, husband or sibling), and the participants' inability to secure a sufficient job to provide for themselves and their families.

“ I lost my parent during the civil war in Sierra Leone so there was no hope for me because I did not want to misuse myself through prostitution and drugs so I decided to travel”

It is also relevant to note that West Africa suffered from an Ebola outbreak between 2014 and 2016 which significantly affected a lot of livelihoods. For example, in Sierra Leone, over 8,706 people were infected with the virus, and an estimated 3,590 died.³⁹ The Ebola crisis affected Sierra Leoneans' livelihoods, jobs, and income across all sectors and over 3,880 jobs were lost in a single year.⁴⁰ Those surveyed and interviewed often cited the loss of a breadwinner as a reason for migration.

“ It's so sorry. I leave my home country just because of Ebola, various (sic), Ebola various kill my mom and my father. From then I started to live with my uncle, and also my uncle too started to treating me like that and in that time I even started to express something like frustrating. So all that brings me the cause to travel.”



Migrated to generate income for self-support

47%

Migrated to generate income for self-support and family

26%

Migrated because of limited opportunities at home

24%

³⁸ Sierra Leoneans say health care is hard to access, beset by corruption – especially for the poor, https://media.africaportal.org/documents/ab_r7_dispatchno346_sierraleone_health_sector_beset_by_corruption_especially_f_eDjP2bV.pdf Accessed 6 Mar, 2022.

³⁹ "THE LONG-TERM IMPACTS AND COSTS OF EBOLA on the - UNICEF." <https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/media/316/file/LTICESLHS-Report-2019.pdf.pdf>. Accessed 4 Mar, 2022.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

MIGRATION ROUTES

In early 2019, Sierra Leone banned all recruitment of Sierra Leoneans for employment abroad. During a press release on April 30th, 2021, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security stated “The ban was instituted in 2019 as a means to curtail the uncoordinated and unregulated inflow and outflow of Migrants, which were mostly facilitated by Non-Registered Under-Ground Overseas Recruitment Agencies”.⁴¹ The ban’s aim was to prevent labour exploitation of Sierra Leoneans abroad. However, instead, it created a flourishing illegal recruitment business and fuelled migration through informal channels, thus increasing human trafficking. This ban was lifted on April 21st, 2021. From a sample size of 406 women from the verified surveys, 90% of the women travelled during the moratorium, 2% between May 2017 and December 2019 and 7% after the moratorium until April 2022 (the latest arrival in our data set).⁴²

Travelling right before, during, or after the ban made no difference in the recruitment process and migration routes. Those that travelled outside of the ban were still deceived, paid recruitment fees and travelled via the same geographical routes. We understand that direct flights did not operate from Freetown, Sierra Leone to Muscat, Oman during this period. Most flights we are aware of went through Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria, Turkey, Egypt, and UAE. In our research and from a sample size of 458 women of the verified surveys, we found that 84% of the women first travelled to another country before departing to Oman, with border crossing by land to Guinea (58%), to Senegal through Guinea (36%) or to Liberia (1%) before departing for Oman. This is primarily because most of the women travelled during the moratorium period and would not have been allowed to travel from Sierra Leone. Furthermore, the price of a ticket from Freetown to Muscat is almost double the price of one leaving from Conakry, Guinea. A single trip ticket from Freetown to Muscat is approximately US\$900 compared to US\$500 when departing from Conakry to Muscat.⁴³ Prices from Dakar, Senegal were slightly cheaper than from Freetown, but only by approximately US\$100.⁴⁴ Most of the women got their travel visas while in Guinea or Senegal.⁴⁵

The U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report from Sierra Leone 2021 (Tier 2) reported that “Traffickers move women through Guinea, The Gambia, Liberia, and Senegal en route to exploitation in the Middle East”. The 2022 TIP Report from Guinea also stated this:

“ Reports indicate trafficking networks fraudulently recruit Guinean, Liberian, and Sierra Leonean women for work abroad, using the Conakry airport to transport victims to exploitative situations in Kuwait and Qatar. In a previous reporting period, an international organisation reported an increase in fraudulent recruitment for forced labour in domestic service in the Middle East, especially Egypt and Kuwait.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ “Government of Sierra Leone lifts ban on overseas recruitment.” 4 May. 2021, https://www.switsalone.com/39005_government-of-sierra-leone-lifts-ban-on-overseas-recruitment/. Accessed 20 May. 2022.

⁴² Number of women that travelled between January 2019, and April 30th 2021.

⁴³ Checked in skyscanner.com in November 2021.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

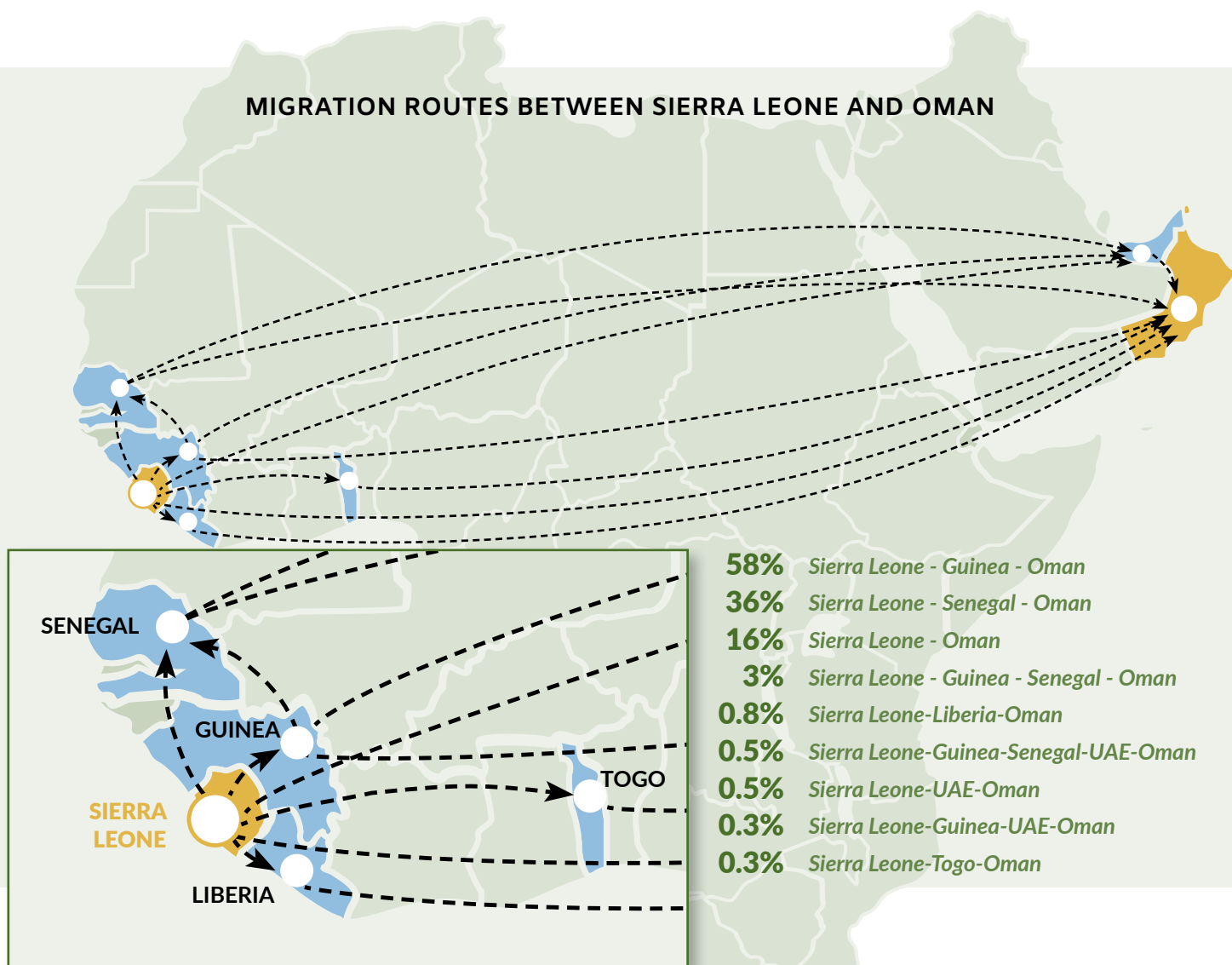
⁴⁵ There is a presence of the Oman Embassy in both Guinea and Senegal.

⁴⁶ “2022 Trafficking in Persons Report - United States Department of State.” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/>. Accessed 6 Aug. 2022.

These two statements are consistent with our findings. Sierra Leonean women were recruited in Sierra Leone and travelled to Guinea or Senegal with false promises before travelling on to Oman. In some instances, once in Guinea or Senegal, they were given the choice of where to travel. These choices were mainly Iraq or Oman. The time spent in either of these countries varied from a few days to a few months and their “agent” or second “agent”, who they paid, was also present in these countries.

From the 84% of the women that did not travel directly to Oman, our findings showed that the most common route (58%) was through Guinea and the second most common through Senegal (36%). Additionally, 3% travelled through both Guinea and Senegal. A smaller percentage transited through other West African countries (Liberia - 0.8% and Togo - 0.3%). Four women (1%) travelled from West Africa to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) before crossing into Oman. During our conversations with the women, we found that women that had arrived in the UAE with a tourist visa were then smuggled to Oman via illegal border entry points.

In total, 16% of the women reported travelling directly from Sierra Leone to Oman.



4.2 Human Trafficking

According to the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, otherwise known as the Palermo Protocol, there are three elements that need to be satisfied to constitute trafficking - the act, the means and the purpose.

Oman signed and ratified the Palermo Protocol in 2005 and passed a Trafficking in Person law in 2008.⁴⁷ Oman also created the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NHCCT) in 2009. In August 2020, the Ministry of Labour established an anti-human trafficking unit. From April 2021 to March 2022 Oman identified 13 women and 1 girl as victims of trafficking, all related to sex trafficking and none for labour trafficking.⁴⁸ In addition, the 2022 TIP report states that “the government has not reported any forced labor of migrant workers, including domestic servitude, prosecutions in the last three years”.⁴⁹

The NHCCT also created an action plan period 2018-2020 where they created awareness-raising campaigns and provided training on how to combat human trafficking. A national symposium on human trafficking was organised, and divisions specialising in human trafficking were established. The action plan period 2021-2023 promotes finding appropriate solutions and strategies to address, prevent and combat human trafficking, strengthen cooperation and support efforts to monitor, investigate and address human trafficking, and to provide care for victims.

However, despite Oman’s efforts to strengthen its efforts to combat human trafficking, its regulations related to domestic work prevent the Sultanate from effectively addressing human trafficking. Additionally, due to the lack of monitoring and enforcement of the rights of domestic workers and the unilateral control held by employers and recruitment agencies over the workers under the kafala system, domestic workers are at high risk of being victims of human trafficking or working in conditions that amount to forced labour.

“ They told me that I we will going to France and get a good job that will help me an (sic) my family but it was all setup I was dissappointed (sic), I want to go home back”

In fact, our research has shown that human trafficking of domestic workers from Sierra Leone to Oman is widespread. Using the guidelines set forth in the PRIF, we have analysed our sample group across the following categories of indicators for the prevalence of human trafficking:

- Recruitment
- Employment Practices and Penalties
- Personal Life and Properties
- Degrading Conditions
- Freedom of Movement
- Debt or Dependency
- Violence and Threats of Violence

⁴⁷The Anti Trafficking Law of 2008 (promulgated by Royal Decree No 126/2008)

⁴⁸“2022 Trafficking in Persons Report - United States Department of State.” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/>. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

⁴⁹ibid.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING INDICATORS



Within each category, there are a number of indicators that constitute either a “strong” or “medium” indications of the prevalence of human trafficking.

We were able to identify a prevalence of 99.8% of human trafficking from our verified sample (468 out of 469 women). The vast majority (93.4%) have been identified as victims of human trafficking due to the restrictions on their freedom of movement or communication. An additional 6.4% of those that did not fall in the prior group were then identified as victims of human trafficking due to the prevalence of a number of other indications for human trafficking from the above-mentioned categories.⁵⁰

In relation to the indicators for prevalence of human trafficking mentioned above, our findings showed that the majority of verified survey respondents (78%) experienced deceptive recruitment. They were **deceived** either about the 1) type of work they were being recruited for, 2) work conditions, 3) salary they would be receiving monthly, or 4) country that they were being recruited to. **Recruitment fees** were paid by 93% of the total verified survey sample and

⁵⁰ For detailed information on all human trafficking indicators refer to the following section on “Forced Labour”

the vast majority of the 469 women we surveyed were also subjected to **working conditions** that constitute exploitation. These findings include: no day off (99%), long working hours (80% worked between 16 and 20 hours a day), wage theft (60%), restrictions of movement (91%). In addition, 26% of the women were locked in a room at some point. Many (84%) had their passports confiscated. (Of those who did not have their passport with them, 85% said their passport was with their employer, 8% with their recruiting agent, 5% did not know and 1% had lost it.) Many reported threats, physical abuse (57%) and sexual abuse (27%). Finally, 55% of the women had their belongings searched by their employer, and 35% did not have their own room to sleep and slept in public spaces such as the kitchen or living room (those that had their own room often described it as a “storage room”).

“ He [told] me that I will come work in Oman for 350 dollar but now the money is not like that”

4.3 Forced Labour

Forced labour is defined by the ILO as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily”.⁵¹ To put this definition into the context of this project, this means a Sierra Leonean woman is in a potential forced labour situation if:

- a) She was deceived during recruitment (i.e. “not offered [her]self voluntarily”), and
- b) She cannot leave her job without penalty (i.e., “exacted...under the menace of any penalty”).

From the 469 verified survey entries, 78% of the women were deceived and did not consent to the working conditions that they found themselves in. In Oman, there are two broad categories of penalties for leaving your employer:

Systemic penalty. In Oman, under Decree 189/2004 regulating domestic work, it is a crime for domestic workers to leave their employer without permission. If an employee leaves their employer, the employer is obligated to file “absconding” charges. Once a worker has “absconding” charges filed against her, she is considered a criminal and is barred from leaving the country voluntarily, and she is subject to detention, arrest and/or deportation.

Illegal penalty. We have consistently witnessed recruiting offices and employers punishing workers who request to return home or change employers. Punishments include physical abuse, verbal abuse, request for “release money”, salary reduction, withholding of salary, increased workload, increased surveillance/invasions of privacy and threats of detention and/or deportation.

To determine if survey participants are victims of forced labour, we also look at both the definition above and ILO’s forced labour indicators.⁵² Using these two tools, we have identified that the vast majority of the group of women surveyed and/or interviewed work(ed) in conditions that are consistent with forced labour indicators. From our verified survey responses we found:

⁵¹ The ILO’s Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) of 1930.

⁵² The indicators are from the ILO’s Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL). Based on the definition of forced labour specified in the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29).

Indicator: Excessive overtime

- 99% reported that they do not have a day off per week
- 80% worked between 16 and 20 hours a day. 63% had one break per day while 30% had none. Of those that had breaks, 55% had between 1 and 1.5 hours while 30% had two hours.

Indicator: Retention of identity documents

- 84% stated that they did not have their passports with them passport confiscation (85% of the womens' passports were with their employer, 8% with their recruiting agent, 5% did not know and 1% had lost it)

Indicator: Deception

- 78% were deceived to be recruited
- 64% were given false information about wages
- 64% were given false information about the nature of work
- 21% of those who received false information about the nature of work, received false information about the working conditions as a domestic worker
- 15% were given false information on the country of work

Indicator: Abusive working and living conditions

- 91% were not able to refuse work, even when they were not feeling well
- 80% were not able to go to the doctor
- 58% reported that their employer did not give them enough food to eat, while 4% said their employers did not provide them with food at all
- 35% did not have their own room, some often sleeping with elderly relatives they were caring for, or on the floor in the kitchen or living area
- 55% said that their belongings were searched, invading their privacy
- 65% worked for more than one family⁵³
- Based on the 390 conversations with the women, a number of them also reported having to work in unsafe working conditions (e.g. cleaning ceiling fans with tall ladders and being susceptible to falls)

Indicator: Debt bondage (see **Recruitment fees** and **Wage theft and salary deduction**)

- 93% paid recruitment fees. These women often find it difficult, if not impossible, to leave their employer because of the debt they have placed on their families or on themselves

⁵³A domestic worker working for more than one family is not only prohibited under the kafala system, but it is also something that the worker often does not agree to, it increases the workload of the worker and with no additional compensation.

- 60% experienced wage theft. Their salaries were not paid, not paid every month, and/or not paid completely
- Based on the 390 conversations with the women and on the negotiations with the employer or recruitment office for the release of the woman, in the majority of these instances the employers and/or recruitment agencies requested payment, or to work without pay to “repay” either the employer’s payment to the recruitment agency or the recruitment agency’s costs to bring them to Oman. We rarely encountered an employer or recruitment office who would allow a worker to leave before the end of a two-year period of service without repaying some of their recruitment fees, regardless of the working conditions that they might be in. In the vast majority of these cases, recruitment offices and employers told workers they could return home if they paid for their return ticket and paid **“release money”**. However, these payments are not financially viable for the vast majority of workers (see **Reasons for migrating** and **Recruitment in Sierra Leone**)

“ Sponsor called me and asked him to give the money to him. [...]. We took the money to the station because the cops they tell to us give the money. [...] But now for ticket, we do not have money again”

Indicator: Restriction of movement

- 91% were not allowed to leave their employer’s property by themselves
- 26% were locked in a room intermittently, most often at night, either in their employer’s home or in their recruitment office. In recruitment offices, they were generally locked in a room with other people

Indicator: Withholding of wages

- 60% experienced wage theft

Indicator: Intimidation and threats

- 77% reported they had been humiliated, discriminated against, or insulted. Most often, they reported that their employers made racist remarks or negative comments about their appearance or body odour.
- From our conversations with the women, it was found that threats of calling the police or withholding part or all of the worker’s salary were the most common forms of intimidation and threats. Our conversations also revealed that employers and office staff intimidated workers by asserting their status as citizens of Oman versus the worker’s status as a migrant worker. These threats were most commonly made when workers voiced concerns about their working conditions or wished to go back to Sierra Leone

Indicator: Physical and sexual violence

Abuse was perpetrated by both employers and staff from the recruitment office.

- 57% reported physical abuse
Slapping and pushing were the most common forms of physical abuse. Throwing objects, flogging, burning, and puncturing of the skin were also inflicted.
- 27% reported sexual violence
This mainly happened at the employer's home where the perpetrator was a male family member. There were instances when wives knew of the abuses and others where the abuser threatened to harm the worker if anyone else found out. Sexual abuse included perpetrators exposing themselves, exposing the victim or touching the victim in private areas, and rape.

Indicator: Isolation

Under Oman laws and visa regulations, all domestic workers must live with their employers, a practice that isolates them from the rest of society

- 50% were not given access to Wi-Fi
- 49% had phones or SIM cards taken away at some point, preventing them from communicating with their families or seeking support
- During our conversations with the women, some shared their locations that pointed to homes in remote areas of Oman, where they were cut off from the outside world as they had no access to transportation

Indicator: Abuse of vulnerability

There are other vulnerabilities affecting the community of Sierra Leonean women:

- **Dependence:** the vast majority of women are/were dependent on employers for housing, medical care, and food
- **English literacy:** from our conversations with the 390 women, the vast majority were not able to read or write English. All of our communications had to be done via voice messages (unless these were simple sentences such as “ok” or “how are you?”), and the survey had to support their literacy level as well. The literacy rate in Sierra Leone is low: 65% of Sierra Leonean women aged 15 and above are not able to read or write⁵⁴

⁵⁴ 2018 data from World Bank, accessed on February 22, 2022 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.FE.ZS?end=2018&locations=SL&start=2018&view=bar>

4.4 Recruitment in Sierra Leone

WHO IS THE RECRUITER?

The opportunity to migrate was introduced to the women by different types of recruiters. Some were individual brokers, others were friends or family members. The majority (61%) of women were recruited by an individual broker, referred to as “my agent” by the women. The other 22% were recruited by friends, and 7% by family members. Only seven women were recruited via social media or traditional media. Most individual brokers were men whereas friends and family members were men and women.

“ Agent said if you go there and work i will help you, you will find money for your children. work for me for 3 months and pay me money.”

For the individual ‘agents’, all the information that the women had from them was their name (sometimes only a first name or pseudonym), phone number and the location from where the ‘agent’ would operate. None of the women were able to provide an office address or a recruitment agency name. Many women told us that once they were recruited, it was common for the recruiters (the agent, friend, and family member) to change their phone number and/or block the worker’s phone number, preventing any further contact.

“ He is a very criminal man I told him that I don’t want to work in Oman but he said there is no problem as soon as I arrived in Oman I told him what I am going through he blocked me till now”

We also received a lot of anecdotal information suggesting that recruiters are targeting women living outside of Freetown in smaller cities, towns, and rural areas, as their deceptive tactics have become more well-known in populated areas in recent years.

The women also reported that multiple recruiters are clearly working together. For example, a woman would be recruited in Sierra Leone and her recruiter would arrange her travels to Guinea to be picked up by a second recruiter. In Guinea, this second recruiter would process her documents and arrange for her to travel from Guinea to Oman.

While it is not possible to prove definitively in every case that recruiters always knew about the working and living conditions they were recruiting the women into, it is highly likely that most had a strong awareness of the common grievances and experiences of women in the domestic work sector in Oman, given the number of women who told us that they reported their distressing experiences of abuse to their recruiters, who in most cases failed to help in any meaningful way.

“ I don’t know the agent, it was a friend that talk me into it. The (sic) painted the whole thing to be interesting. They told me it’s just to clean the house and cook. But on getting here it was a slavery work to extend that I can’t even talk to my children I left back home.”

RECRUITMENT FEES

According to the Employer Pays Principle, the ILO Guiding Principles and Operational Guidelines on Fair Recruitment, and the Dhaka Principles, private recruitment agencies in sending and receiving countries are not supposed to charge, directly or indirectly, in whole or in part, any fees or costs to workers.⁵⁵ However, according to our findings, 93% of women paid illegal recruitment fees. Unfortunately, the majority of the women saw these payments as normal since they were joining a “programme” that would help them find work or study opportunities.



“ I give my agent 4 hundred dollars and I give The Man who board (sic) me and other [another] 4 hundred dollars and in the airport I give 1 hundred dollars again”

Of those who paid recruitment fees (sample size: 395), the average fee was US\$1,320 and the median was US\$700. The majority (60%) paid between US\$500 and US\$1000, 19% paid less than US\$500, 7% paid between US\$1,501 and US\$5,000, and 6% paid more than US\$5,000. Those who believed they were going to the US or Europe paid an average of US\$425 more than the average person who was told they would be going to Oman. Those told they were going to Turkey, paid an average of \$165 more.

“ I pay seven hundred dollars and he told me that I have to pay for my tickets and boarding fee”

What should theoretically happen, is for the recruitment office in Oman to pay the recruitment agency in Sierra Leone for their recruitment support, and the employer pays the recruitment office in Oman for their services including flight ticket and visa expenses. However, in reality the worker pays the recruiter in Sierra Leone. Then, in Oman, the employer often passes on the recruitment fees that they paid the recruitment office to the worker by making her work for 2-4 months without payment either at the beginning of the contract or before they leave the employer. For workers that no home is found, or interim, they are sent by the office to work for different households for short times for which then the office withholds their salaries.

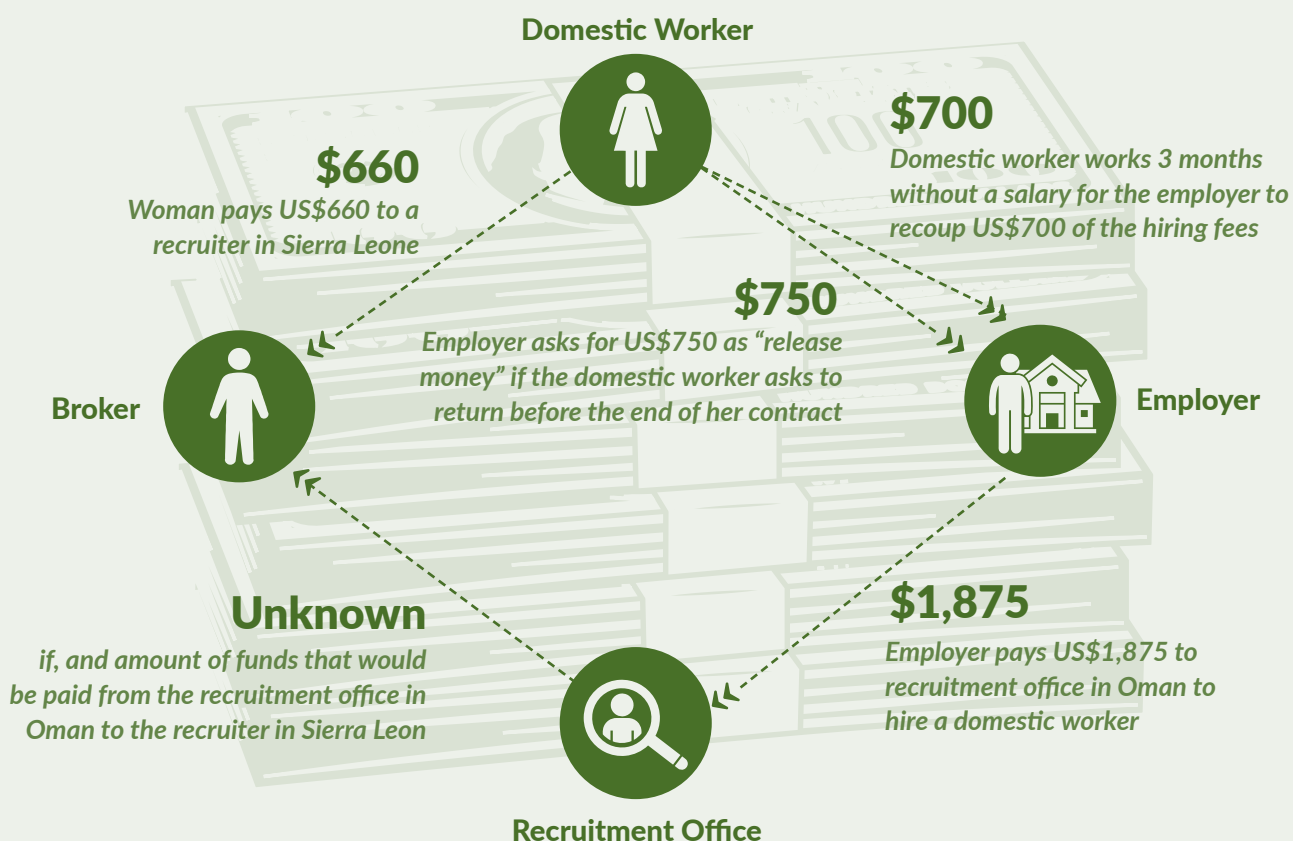
“ I paid about \$800 [USD] for the visa and everything but on getting here when they were treating me like slave, if I complain my sponsor will tell me that he bought me because he did my visa and bought my ticket. So the whole thing got me confused based on the money I paid to my agent”

Also, it is important to note that, as the vast majority of women paid a significant sum of money to migrate and have already invested a lot, it is very difficult for women to return home even if they can, as they know that if they return their debts still need to be paid. As a result, many domestic workers stay in exploitative working conditions with the hope that they will eventually

⁵⁵ “General principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment ...” 22 May, 2019, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/fair-recruitment/WCMS_536755. Accessed 20 May, 2022.

be paid or working conditions will improve. This can be described as a situation of debt bondage; an exploitative situation from which women cannot escape from because of debt, and which often leads to situations of forced labour.⁵⁶

FLOW OF MONEY: RECRUITMENT FEE, WAGE THEFT AND RELEASE MONEY



SOURCES TO PAY THE RECRUITMENT FEES

For most Sierra Leoneans, paying the recruitment fee requested is not an easy task. Sierra Leone is one of the economically poorest countries in the world, ranking 180 out of 187. The average income in Sierra Leone is US\$509.37 per year, last recorded in 2020. That means that the recruitment fees paid on average are equivalent to one year's work.⁵⁷

“ I sold my clothes,my refrigerator,my television,my sitting chairs and i also sold all my goods for a cheaper price just to complete the money for my traveling”

⁵⁶ "Forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking - ILO." <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/lang--en/index.htm>. Accessed 14 Jun. 2022.

⁵⁷ The Gross Domestic Product per capita in Sierra Leone was last recorded at 509.37 US dollars in 2020. The GDP per capita in Sierra Leone is equivalent to 4% of the world's average. Source <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=SL>. Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.

To pay these recruitment fees, 34% of the Sierra Leonean women in Oman borrowed from their family, 14% sold their personal belongings, 18% borrowed from another person, 3% got credit from an agent and 5% used their savings. About 15% of the women took out a bank loan from a bank in Sierra Leone, which indicates that they had high hopes that the opportunity would help them generate enough income to repay the loan and the interest while being able to support themselves and their families.

“ I sold one land i acquired and I also gave out my shop and sold everything I had inside to another person”

“ Well I work for four months for my agent”

Women who borrowed money to pay recruitment fees were hesitant to return to Sierra Leone, despite being in a difficult situation in Oman.⁵⁸ Women who borrowed money from a bank to pay these recruitment fees were concerned about potentially being arrested upon returning. Those who borrowed from friends or family were concerned about the social/relational implications.

DECEPTION AT RECRUITMENT

Deceiving individuals at the point of recruitment for the purpose of exploitation is a key element of human trafficking. Deception was the most common means of recruiting Sierra Leonean women to Oman.

Most women had limited access to information about working or studying abroad and relied on the information provided by these agents, friends, and family. For example, one woman reported that her friend (who recruited her) was working in Kuwait, and her friend told her that she would be paid “huge money.” Another reported a similar story; where her friend was working in Lebanon and she spoke highly of her work experience.

“ This she was working in dubai in a factory as a fruit packing then she tell my about how life is getting better for her then she tells she will help me to work in the same place as a fruits packing then she directly connects me with her agent so I will go and work with her in dubai, but not knowing that am coming to Oman to work as a maid.”



Borrowed money from family

34%

Borrowed from someone else - trusted money

18%

Got a loan from the bank

15%

Sold their personal belongings

14%

Used their savings

5%

Got credit from an agent

3%

⁵⁸ “Women, Debt, & Detention: An Exploratory Report on Fraudulent Conversion and the Criminalisation of Debt in Sierra Leone” <http://advocaidsl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/AdvocAid-Women-Debt-and-Detention-Report.pdf>. Accessed 20 May, 2022.

Of the 469 women, 78% of the women were deceived. Our research indicates that 15% of the women were deceived about the country they were migrating to, an extreme form of deception. Recruiters had told them that they were going to migrate to and work in the United Arab Emirates, particularly in Dubai (38%); Europe, the United States or Canada (23%); Turkey (15%), Kurdistan (9%) or Kuwait (8%). Others were told only that they were migrating to other African countries, like Senegal. This suggests that recruiters used these countries to create a false narrative of security to recruit women. For example, women who decided to migrate to Turkey or the UAE often knew people who have travelled or worked there, so they felt more comfortable with the decision to migrate for work. These women found out that they were travelling to Oman until they saw the ticket or they had arrived.

It was also found that 64% of the women were deceived about the type of work they would be doing in Oman. Recruiters promised work opportunities in supermarkets, hair salons, hospitals, hotels, and restaurants. This means that the vast majority of this group of women did not know that they were being recruited to work as domestic workers. A total of 21% of the women reported that they had agreed to work as domestic workers, but when they arrived the actual conditions of work were different from what had been promised.

“ They tell me that I’m coming to work in a big company with different people from different countries”

In addition, 64% of the women reported that the salary they received in Oman was less than the salary they were promised before travelling.

“ All what the agent told me is lie, he said only one babe I take care of salary 180 Riyals but when I reached Oman not true they pay me 80 Riyals, no rest, no sleeping, change diapers a big woman”

“ He told me that im coming to work as a nurse”

Additional types of deception we documented included recruiters in Sierra Leone providing workers with misinformation about the length of their contracts/commitment, and telling workers that they would have the freedom to change jobs, employers and, in some cases, their destination country. Many of the women were also under the impression that their recruiters would continue to support and advocate for them while they were working in Oman. However, we never documented a case where a recruiter provided any kind of support to a worker once she was in Oman. In fact, in most cases, recruiters blocked the phone numbers of the women once they arrived in Oman.



64%

Were deceived about the type of work they were being recruited for

64%

Were deceived about the amount of salary they would be paid

15%

Were deceived about the destination country they were being recruited to

A large number of Sierra Leonean women in Oman felt disempowered and deceived by this experience. When asked if they wanted to know how to refer their recruiter to the police, 18% of them responded 'yes', 22% 'not yet' and 42% 'no'.



POTENTIAL FABRICATION OF MEDICAL TESTS FOR OBTAINING VISAS

To obtain a visa, migrant workers must be free from communicable diseases such as hepatitis, HIV and TB. In addition, those seeking domestic workers' visa, must also undergo a pregnancy test and test negative to obtain a visa before arriving. All migrant workers that want to work in the Gulf countries are required to do medical tests before migrating to ensure that they can obtain a visa upon arrival. However, in the case of Sierra Leoneans, we found four (4) women who were recruited and travelled to Oman and did not pass the medical test upon arrival. According to the women, they had all undergone medical tests in Sierra Leone and we assume that either the tests were not done correctly or they were lied to regarding their results. The issues found included TB, HIV and pregnancy.

In one instance one woman reported that the clinic where she did the test had said that there was something wrong, but that she was ok to travel.

4.5 Recruitment Offices in Oman

Upon arrival in Oman, a woman is picked up from the airport, her passport is taken from her and she is usually taken to the recruitment office, also known as the "office" or directly to the employer's home if she has already been assigned to a home. Upon arrival, there is a period of 90 days for the new employer or recruitment office to take the domestic worker for mandatory medical tests and process her visa.

The recruitment office in Oman is responsible for matching prospective employers with domestic workers. The employer is responsible for paying the recruitment office for their services, which include the flight ticket and visa costs of the domestic worker and a fee for the work of the recruitment agency. The fees that employers pay to the recruitment office vary, as do the workers' salaries, depending on the nationality of the domestic worker:

FEES FOR THE RECRUITMENT OF DOMESTIC WORKERS IN OMAN

Nationality	Recruitment Agency one-time cost to employ a domestic worker	Worker's Salary per month
Bangladesh	1,000 OMR (US\$2,600)	90-100 OMR (US\$234 - \$260)
Philippines and Indonesia	1,300 - 1,500 OMR (US\$3,380 - \$3,900)	160 OMR (US\$416)
Sierra Leone	800 OMR (US\$1,875)	80-90 OMR (US\$208 - \$234)

Neither the recruitment office's fees to hire a domestic worker in Oman nor the domestic worker's minimum salary is regulated. Salaries that are regulated are only for workers whose origin country has a bilateral agreement with Oman stipulating a minimum salary for a domestic worker. Sierra Leone does not have a bilateral agreement with Oman for the protection of domestic workers.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the lack of regulations around recruitment offices means the fees charged to employers to hire a domestic worker are extremely high compared to the minimum salary for Omani citizens of 325 OMR (approximately US\$844). There is no transparency around the fees and how they are broken down. These fees are a high investment for employers, incentivising potential worker abuses such as salary reductions, increased workloads or longer working hours, as well as requesting "release money" for the domestic worker to return home before the end of the contract.

“ Few days ago I tell boss that I'm sick so let them please help me to go back in my country he said and then I ask him to take me my office the office doesn't allow me to go said so stay outside for so many hours and I talk to my boss to come and pick me them they said they'll give me other house to because I say no the mother for boss tell me that they'll take me in police after then my boss hit me.

FAILING PRE-EMPLOYMENT MEDICAL TEST

As an employment condition, domestic migrant workers must undergo a pre-employment medical test to identify particular contagious diseases (e.g. HIV, TB) and pregnancy. These tests, it has been well documented and reported, are discriminatory⁶⁰ - in particular HIV and pregnancy testing. In addition, the confidentiality of personal data and privacy is not respected.

It is also important to point out that, according to the Domestic Worker's contract, the recruiting office is responsible for paying the worker's return ticket within 180 days from arrival if she "has a disability of a type that will render him/her unable to commence the assigned work" and if she "has an infectious or chronic disease or a mental disorder".

During this project, we supported the repatriation of four women who did not pass the pre-employment medical test, all within the same period of time. Upon failing the medical tests, the offices demanded that the women or their families pay for their return tickets. It is also worth noting here that all of these four women were recruited through the same recruitment office in Oman and three of them had the same recruiter in Sierra Leone.

TREATMENT OF DOMESTIC WORKERS BY RECRUITING OFFICES

Treatment of domestic workers by recruiting offices varies but, in general, mistreatment is widespread. Throughout the project we documented women being subjected to threats, physical

⁵⁹ Should there be a minimum wage for expats? - Times of Oman." 28 Jun. 2018, <https://timesofoman.com/article/61780-should-there-be-a-minimum-wage-for-expats>. Accessed 20 May. 2022.

⁶⁰ "R201 - Domestic Workers Recommendation, 2011 (No. 201) - ILO." https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100::NO:12100:P12100_ILO_CODE:R201:NO. Accessed 25 Nov. 2021.

and sexual violence, wage theft, and denial of food and water by staff or owners of the recruitment offices (see [Threats, abuse and harassment, and violence, living conditions, wage theft](#)).

“ Because am very sick i ask them to take me to the hospital they refuse so they lock me in office with no food”

4.6 Domestic Worker's Work Contract

Oman issued a standard domestic work contract in 2011 regulating the relationship between the employer and the domestic worker. This contract is the same for all domestic workers, it is only the personal details and the salary that vary. However, this work contract is unconscionable, offering minimal protection towards domestic workers. It is rarely signed by either the employer or the domestic worker, and it is mainly used as a tool by employers to keep domestic workers working for them, regardless of working and living conditions, for two years.

ABSENCE OF A WORK CONTRACT

A work contract is a fundamental framework regulating the relationship between the employer and employee, which states the rights and responsibilities of both parties. The contract is to ensure that both the employer and domestic worker have a clear understanding of what is expected. The Standard Domestic Work Contract in Oman “[...] is not valid unless electronically or physically signed by both parties”.⁶¹

From our community of Sierra Leonean women in Oman, only 22% confirmed that they had signed a contract in a language they understood. In the case of Oman, this would be in both Arabic and in English. From the rest of the women, 54% said that they did not sign a contract in a language they understood while another 15% said that they do not know whether they signed a contract or not. It is also important to note that from the 390 domestic workers that we had conversations with, and from all the documents that they shared with us that they had a copy of (screenshots on their phone), no one was able to share a copy/screenshot of their contract.

With no work contract in place, the domestic worker is vulnerable to working under conditions that best suit the employer, creating vulnerability to forced labour and other forms of exploitation and abuse. For example, we documented that some of the domestic workers' responsibilities included different tasks that ranged from well-defined domestic work to work that falls outside the scope of domestic work, such as animal care or agriculture. Additionally, 65% of the women reported working for more than one family. Working for families other than your employer in Oman is not only prohibited, according to the Ministerial Decree 189/2004, but also it sheds light on the extent to which employers will make use of their domestic workers.

⁶¹ "Contract of Work Domestic Workers and Similar Jobs" known also as the Standard Domestic Work Contract.

“ I was working for five families in the same compound I do all the house work cleaning four rooms and four birthrooms (sic) and a palour but i clean all the five families compound i throw dirty for all the people in the five different houses i cook an wash plate than (sic) i wash their mum i laundry and iron the day i said am tired to wash their mum all of them avoid me then i call in the office mama Maha*said i should do it .i said i do all the house work for 5 family she said she knows let me work i said i don't want his place family were just coming everyday she said no office for me if i dont work they will take me back to my country. Them i cryed (sic) when month finished the 26 i ask them for my money they said they give me 70 rials i said no this is not the money u should give me is 90 rials they said the balanced (sic) is for the office”

In addition to the absence of a work contract, we also documented at least six (6) cases where the employer renewed the work contract and her visa without the domestic worker's approval. Under the kafala system, the employer has all power over the domestic worker, including having the ability to renew her contract without her approval or presence. As with the first contract, this contract is also not signed by either the employer or domestic worker nor shared with the domestic worker.

DOMESTIC WORKERS' WORK CONTRACTS

The Standard Domestic Work Contract used to employ domestic workers offers minimal protection from exploitation. In addition to being minimal, it also contains unfair clauses or threatens the well-being and safety of domestic workers. These clauses in the Standard Domestic Work Contract include:

- » **Termination of contract.** The employer has the right to terminate the contract for any reason, but the domestic worker can only do so “if it is proved that he/she has been abused by the First Party [the employer], or if the latter violated any of the basic legally acknowledged obligations of the provisions of this contract.” However, in reality, domestic workers do not have access to a mechanism to raise complaints in case they have suffered abuse or the employer violated any of his/her obligations, rendering them unable to terminate the contract. For example, when we assisted women in filing complaints against their employers or we directly filed complaints on their behalf, terminating their contract was not an option. Instead, they were returned to their employer with no justification (see [Access to grievance mechanism](#))
- » **Changing employers.** A domestic worker cannot change employers unless her current employer agrees. In the work contract, there are no protection clauses to allow the domestic worker to transfer employers. In practice, to change employers domestic workers need to have permission from their employer and already have another employer willing to take her under his/her sponsorship. However, this rarely happens. Among the group of 390 women that we spoke with, we did not encounter any workers who had been able to change employers legally.

- » **Health insurance.** In the Standard Domestic Work Contract it is stated that the employer “shall commit” to “bear the medical care expenses” for the domestic worker, but it does not require the employer to provide health insurance. This means that the employer should cover medical care expenses if it is needed, but not that health insurance is mandatory. From the 390 women we held conversations with, we documented a large number of women who had requested that their employers take them to see a doctor. Employers responded by either ignoring their requests and providing Panadol, or taking the worker to a clinic but having the worker bear all expenses. In addition, it is stated that it is obligatory for the employer to “provide death and work injuries insurance” for the domestic worker, protecting the employer from any liability.
- » **Probation period.** The domestic worker “shall be subjected to a probation period for 0 days and shall not exceed 90 days”, but the worker does not have the same right to a probation period or the right to return to the recruitment office if she wishes to change employer.
- » **Working hours.** The contract does not specify the maximum working hours within a 24 hour period, leading to the majority (80%) of domestic workers we surveyed working between 16 and 20 hours a day and always being ‘on call,’ especially when there were children or elderly people in the house.

Again, it is important to note that while there is a standard contract provided by the Government to the employer, a worker has never been able to share with us a copy of her contract, putting in question its validity.

“ **No communication, no time to rest, everyone will shout at u when u clean they will use there (sic) big toes and asked u to clean again, I washed clothes even for the daughters (sic) from there (sic) husband home every day, I take care of domestic animals, any things from out side heavy or light they will called me, I sleep on the floor in the store is not really easy.”**

4.7 Working and Living Conditions

CONFISCATION OR RETENTION OF IDENTITY DOCUMENTS

The ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930, considers the confiscation or retention of workers’ identity documents as an abusive practice, increasing the vulnerability of workers to becoming victims of forced labour.⁶² Additionally, although retaining the passport of a domestic worker does not necessarily indicate an intent to commit abuse, it does have a crucial impact on the worker’s perception of her freedom.

In our research, we found that the practice of withholding a domestic worker’s identity documents – both passport and civil ID – by both the employers and recruitment offices, was commonly practised and accepted.

⁶² “Q&As on Business and Forced Labour - ILO.” https://www.ilo.org/empent/areas/business-helpdesk/faqs/WCMS_DOC_ENT_HLP_FL_FAQ_EN/lang--en/index.htm. Accessed 20 May, 2022

Several reports and articles have reported that the Ministry of Labour circular No.2/2006 prohibits employers from withholding migrant workers' passports.⁶³ However, we have been trying to find this circular without success. We conducted an in-depth search both in English and Arabic and throughout government websites all to no avail.⁶⁴ We also tried to reach the Ministry of Labour via phone for clarification but we were not able to get through. Therefore, without seeing a government document prohibiting employers from withholding passports from domestic workers, we would not like to assume that it is so, but rather state that it is not clearly prohibited.

Researched throughout the Arab States, one of the reasons for employers to withhold the worker's passport and/or civil ID is because of the fear of domestic workers leaving the employer to work somewhere else.⁶⁵ However, these motives in the context of Oman are not realistic as a worker is not able to change employers without the existing employer or recruitment office transferring her visa sponsorship, even if she possesses her passport.

Survey responses indicated that 84% of the women did not have their passports with them, while 13% reported that they did have their passports with them. Of those that did not have their passport, 85% stated that their passport is with their employer, 8% with their recruitment office, 5% stated that they do not know where their passport is and 1% stated that they had lost it.

However, there are contradictions between the survey responses and our conversations with the workers. A higher number responded positively in the survey than in our one-to-one conversations with 390 women (99% from a sample size of 390 women did not have their passport). It may be that access to their passports changed, or that they considered a photo of their passport sufficient to answer positively. Furthermore, of those we supported through repatriation, only five had possession of their passports. Therefore, we believe that the number of women who did not have their passports with them might be higher than the survey indicated.

For those that actually had their passports with them, it was for two reasons: Their employer or recruitment office had kicked the worker out of the house or office right before the end of their two-year contract and filed "absconding" charges against the worker to avoid paying her return flight ticket, or because the worker was able to take her documents with her before leaving the employer.

The widespread practice of confiscation and withholding of domestic worker's identity documents severely restricts the women from bargaining over the terms and conditions of the job or working conditions if she is still with her employer, or, if she has left the employer, from returning home (assuming no charges were made), seeking medical attention, or sending or receiving remittances. Without documents, they were also unable to access key government services, such as the amnesty registration.

“ dont have any documents, cant go because my sponsor has my documents”

⁶³ "REGULATORY FRAMEWORK GOVERNING MIGRANT WORKERS 1." https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_776526.pdf. Accessed 8 Feb. 2022.

⁶⁴ The circular would have to be published in this government website, where all circulars must be published <https://qanoon.om/> Accessed 3 Feb. 2022.

⁶⁵ "Employers' perspective towards domestic workers in Kuwait - ILO." https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_429591.pdf. Accessed 20 May. 2022.

The women were also consistently concerned about when and where they might be asked to present identity documents. This fear, real or not, leads to most women reporting that they are wary about leaving the house where they stay for fear of encountering the police and being asked to present documents they don't have. In addition, a group of women reported that they did not travel on buses, which are considerably cheaper than taxis, as they had heard identity documents were required to board.

It is important to note that in addition to the multiple challenges that domestic workers face when their passport is confiscated and withheld, the psychological implications that domestic workers are subjected to are beyond this research but present. Through our conversations with the women, we often observed the state of feeling powerless, trapped and helpless among the women for not having their passports with them. In addition, we also documented multiple cases where the passport was taken in Sierra Leone by airport officials upon returning due to the inability to pay the **health declaration fees**, in these instances, we also observed the negative impact and psychological consequences it had on the women.

“ Up to now I go to the airport and they tell me I should pay \$80 dollars to collect my passport. My passport is still with them in the airport”

WAGE THEFT AND SALARY DEDUCTION

Wage theft refers to the unlawful and intentional non-payment, partial or complete, of a worker's wages or entitlements by their employer or recruitment office for work carried out. Wage theft can also refer to deductions taken from a worker's salary for no valid reason. Salary deductions include when the payment is reduced, or when the salary is delayed, for example, paying every 6 weeks instead of every 4 weeks.



“ I got paid through by the sponsored , she sometimes paid me fifty five real (sic) for only one month sometimes I don't got (sic) paid”

Wage theft is a common practice of systematically forcing workers to keep working in the hopes that their dues will be paid in full. This practice not only denies the worker a fair payment for their work but is often used to limit the worker's ability to leave from fear that, if they left, they would lose their back wages. The workers' ability and hopes to return home are tied up in back wages, as they often do not want to – or are unable to – return without the money they have earned. In almost every case, workers had plans for how they would use these wages, generally to pay off debt (often debt incurred to travel to Oman), start a business, or support their families. Wage theft, which keeps workers bonded to their work and forced to work, is a practice that can constitute debt bondage and/or forced labour.

“ Maybe I will have my salary after two months and I will paid 70 Oman rials. Yes, because they know I am weak and their nothing I can do to them. So they too advantage of my situation”

From the 469 Sierra Leonean women we surveyed, 60% were victims of wage theft. In total, 41% did not receive their salary every month and 59% did. From the 59% that did receive their salary every month, 32% did not receive their complete salary. In addition, during our conversations with the women we noticed that it is common for the employer not to pay the domestic worker for the last 2 or 3 months before finishing the contract or shortly before she is about to return home.

WORKING HOURS

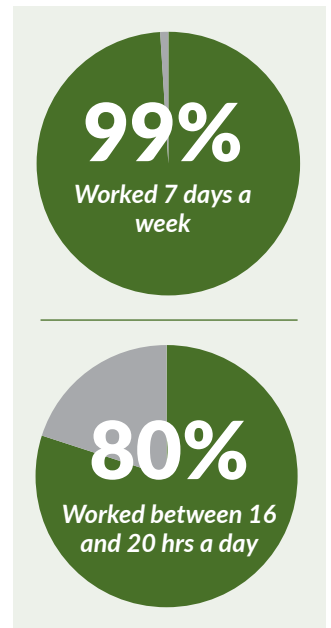
Ministerial Decree 189/2004 for domestic workers and the Standard Domestic Work Contract mandate a one day off per week, however, they do not define maximum working hours or overtime payment.⁶⁶

In our research, we found that 99% of the women work without any days off. Long working hours are also a widespread issue: the majority of women (80%) worked between 16 and 20 hours a day with 87% starting work between 4 and 6 am, and 84% ending between 10 pm and 1 am. A total of 63% had one break per day while 30% had none. Of those that had breaks, 55% had between 1 and 1.5 hours break while 30% had two hours.

“ No breaks, unless the childrens (sic) sleep”

These working conditions have led to extreme exhaustion for the vast majority of this group of Sierra Leonean women, as they would for any other person. This has possibly led to the deterioration of their physical and mental health, which we observed in several women to the extent that airlines did not allow them to board. This extreme exhaustion was one of the main drivers for the women to leave their employers, simply unable to continue working in such conditions.

“ I was sick to the extend that I was unable to talk, they did not take me to hospital I had to use hunger (sic) and garlic to treat myself. Then later he transferred me to work for another family. When I got to that family, I fell sick again, I taught (sic) I was going to die. So they took me to hospital but thesame (sic) day I came back from hospital, I continued working they could not allow me to rest. The sickness continued that I lost sleep, I don't sleep again. At a point I was going insane I don't know what I was doing again, I think right I was behaving like one who was going to run mad. I shed tears each time I remember it.”



⁶⁶ For reference, according to Omani labour law, which does not apply to domestic workers, workers cannot be made to work more than 48 hours a week. If overtime is required, the worker must be compensated at 125% of their normal wages or given leave from work in lieu of the overtime hours. The law allows for limited exceptions and provides that a worker be paid double wage if required to work on their weekly rest day. Workers are also entitled to at least one 30-minute break per day. Reference: Ministry of Manpower, Royal Decree No. 35/2003 on the Promulgation of the Labour Code, Part Four, Chapter Three, Articles 68-74. Accessed via https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=78809 on February 24, 2022.

RESTRICTION OF MOVEMENT AND ISOLATION

Restriction of movement and isolation puts the women in a very vulnerable position. Not only that it isolates them from accessing any potential form of support, help or assistance if needed, but also further isolates them from their families and loved ones.

“ She said I can not use my phone in a month I only use it once in month”

In our research, we found that the women were restricted from both leaving their employers' house or their office and isolated from accessing communication with the outside world. When asked if they were able to leave their employers' houses by themselves, 91% say that they are not able to.

“ He said I came to work, not to speak with family”

In addition, 49% of the women were forced to hand in their phones or SIM cards to their employer at some point, 21% stated that they were not allowed to use their phones, 38% that they were allowed while 41% were allowed to use their phones sometimes. As for Wi-Fi access, 50% of the women reported they did not have access, 24% had access sometimes and 26% had access. Those without Wi-Fi access rely on prepaid data which they must pay for access to the internet. On the other hand, if their wages are withheld or if they are not able to leave the house to purchase credit, no form of communication with the outside world exists.

“ Sometimes when I am sick and she ask me to do something if I tell her I am sick she will get angry instead of giving me medicine she will disconnect me from wifi”

Furthermore, 26% of the women reported that they were locked or had been locked in a room at some point, some stating that they were locked in for days and some without basic necessities, such as food and water. During our conversations, it was noted that employers and recruitment office agents would lock their domestic workers in as a form of “punishment” for behaviour that was not accepted such as asking for their salary, refusing to do a task, requesting to return to the office, or refusing to work due to sickness or exhaustion. In other cases, workers reported that their employers or office agents would lock them in rooms if they thought the woman was going to try to leave the house/office. These forms of punishment usually lasted for a couple of days.



91%

Were not allowed to leave the house by themselves

50%

Did not have consistent access to Wi-Fi

49%

Were forced to hand in their phones or SIM's card to their employers at some point

26%

Were locked or had been locked in a room at some point

21%

Were not allowed to use their phones

“ They lock me in my because when I tell them that i want to use my phone they said no i should use phone so I decide (sic) to use phone they bit (sic) me and lock me up”

“ Some times they use to locked me the room because when they to out and live me alone then they disided (sic) to locked (sic) me in the room”

LIVING CONDITIONS

Ministerial Order No. 189 of 2004 regulating working conditions of domestic workers states that employers are required to provide “appropriate room and board” for the domestic worker, and the standard work contract for domestic workers states that the employer shall commit to “provide decent food and accommodation if the nature of work requires it”.

However, we often found that the provided living conditions of domestic workers were not appropriate. In our findings, 65% of the women had their own room, which was often described as a storage room or a small room. The remaining 35% of the women did not have their own private room and stated that they were forced to sleep in the kitchen, living room or in the bedrooms of the children or the elderly people they cared for.

Often, whether in their own room or not, they slept on the floor. The living conditions were reported by the participants as humiliating and unsafe, and with no privacy. In one instance a woman shared how they did not allow her to lock her room or the bathroom and how men in the home would open the bathroom door and look while she took a shower.

“ Two freezer inside the room. Their clothes inside the same room others items are there in the same where I sleep. Father, mother, children come in going out for the rest of the day even when I want to sleep. No sleep closing the door very hard, sometimes even I close the door they will leave it open if I talk about that they told me that it is not my home.”

“ My real sponsor gave me out to another family. This family never made provision for a maid room. My room was like a dumping ground, it was a parking store. It’s was even difficult for me to get to my bed because there was no space. I don’t breath well in that room because of the loads there. Intact (sic) it was a terrible experience in that house.”



58%

Were not given enough food

35%

Did not have their own private room and had to sleep in the kitchen, living room or in the bedroom of the children or the elderly people they took care of

4%

Were not provided with food at all

Our research also documented how the women did not have the ability to satisfy basic human needs, such as food and nutrition, along with hygiene products. Of the 469 women, 58% reported that their employer did not provide them with sufficient food, while 4% stated that their employer did not provide them food at all. Some women stated that they were only given rice and tea, others stated that they were expected to buy their own food and soap, while having limited income and ability to leave the household of the employer to make purchases.

“ She gave me just little and that little also is what they have eaten and left”

“ Well thank God am the one that cooking for them so I have the small opportunity to eat”

Some women reported that they ate only leftovers. Others provided videos of their food which showed plain white rice with no salt or white rice with sugar and instant coffee or an empty refrigerator.

THREATS, ABUSE, HARASSMENT, AND VIOLENCE

“ I was called a slave and should only work like a slave and no privileges should be given to me.”

Sierra Leonean domestic workers in Oman are highly vulnerable to physical abuse, threats, bullying and violence. Severe instances of violence, including rape, flogging, “pinning” of skin and pulling of teeth have been documented.⁶⁷

“ Mam, they pinning me right now, there is no way I can feel my hand. It is so cold and so hot in my bones. [...] My hand, I am dying, painfully. I am still locked up, mam I am tired”

“ One morning when i finished working i was feeling weak so i decided to take rest but unfortunately i slept off so when my madam meet sleeping she started shouting at me, using abusive language on me she said that am here to work if i finished working i should look for another work to do that i should not rest.”

Verbal abuse including humiliation, insults, and discriminatory remarks were also very common. 77% of the women stated that they were either verbally discriminated against, felt humiliated, or were insulted by the employer, his/her family, or recruitment office staff. The most common verbal insults included being called a ‘slave’ or a ‘dog’ or Arabic insults, but women were also humiliated based on their physical characteristics (body or hair) or body odour.

“ They said am smelling and my room have bad smells and we don’t have the same color I am a slave”

⁶⁷Evidence was provided for all these cases which included audios, videos and pictures.

“ They tell me that I smell, if I pass they will cover their nose. I feel terribly bad about it because I know I don’t smell. Sometimes my madam will ask me if I poo on my body that everywhere is smelling. Sometimes in presence of her children, she will ask me if I brushed my teeth. And I tell her yes, she will say I should go and brush again because my mouth is smelling.”

In addition, the women stated that they felt humiliated when their belongings were searched. Although the reasons for searching their belongings were different in every case, a common reason was that something was “missing” from the house and the employer or family members needed to check her belongings. Of the 469 surveyed, 55% reported that their belongings were searched at some point.

Threats are often used as a way to ensure that the worker remains compliant or obeys what is being requested. Employers most commonly threatened to call the police and have the worker arrested and deported, or to lock her in a room if, for example, she complained about work. Others included threats to be beaten, especially by recruiting office staff if she would return to the office. Although most requests were to keep the worker compliant, other threats included non-payment and threats of a sexual nature. Many of these threats had real consequences and were more than mere threats.

“ My boss is not good some time he want to sex me when I tell my madam she said that if I tell anyone they will kill me that why I live the house and come outside”

“ Living is not good day [they] beat me he say he pull my teeth sometime he will not give me food”

In regards to physical abuse, more than half of the women experienced physical abuse. Our research indicates that 57% of the women have been hit, slapped, pushed, or physically harmed by either their employer or a member of the employers’ family. Some of the women reported being physically assaulted and abused by the sponsor and then threatened with ‘the police’. Other women noted that they were beaten and threatened using the fear of wage withholding. The majority of those that experienced extreme physical abuse provided videos, audios and photos of their bodies or the incident itself.

“ In my first house, sponsor and wife beat me up. Hit me with steel in my back, hip hurts when I sit down now. Hip bone and back pain. Sponsor choked me. I defended myself with an iron.”



77%

Were verbally discriminated against, felt humiliated, were insulted by the employer (or his/her family), or recruitment office staff

57%

Experienced physical abuse

55%

Reported that their belongings were searched

27%

Were victims of sexual abuse

“ they [her employer’s family] poured dirty water on my head because I was late to come because I was praying. They [her employer’s family] slapped me, they [her employer’s family] took me to another house”.

“ When my baba came from work [...] he would beat me and slap me [...] so the last thing I see from my employer, me and my madam we were cooking in the kitchen he used a spoon from the hot oil and put it in my hand, this is the last thing they did to my body, so I decided to ran away.”

Along with the physical abuse, 27% reported that they had experienced sexual abuse. Of those that disclosed the perpetrator, they indicated that it was an employer or a family member. Furthermore, 9% of the women were not sure if they had been sexually assaulted or abused.

“ Their son rape me and later took a knife for me”

MARIATU’S STORY

Mariatu* was regularly approached by 5 men who lived in the house where she worked. Late at night, they demanded sex. This made Mariatu afraid to sleep, which made her exhausted throughout the day. Mariatu did report being sexually harassed to her sponsor. She appealed to him by reminding him that he is a father to a daughter but no actions were taken.

HEALTH ISSUES/HEALTH INSURANCE

“ They said only a citizen can get access to medical”

The health of many of these women was in a dire condition, both for those who were with their employer and those who had left. For the women still in their employer’s home, the main complaint was extreme weight loss and inability to work due to exhaustion. We believe this was due to the long working hours and the minimal nutrition that most women received. Other health issues included inability to walk, swelling of feet, inability to retain food, no bowel movement and vomiting of blood as well as workplace injuries, such as broken bones and severe skin damage due to burns. For this group of women, the response of the employer varied, but it was common for the employer to provide Panadol and ignore other requests. They were also often told by their employer that they were not really sick and that they just did not want to work.

“ they don’t want to know that you are sick, they pay you end of the month but you must still work. no rest no day off. if you are lucky they give you panadol (i am lucky but i have to ration the panadol they give me). can’t go to doctor because don’t have documents”

“ They did not allow me to go out, they said they come with me to work not to sick”

For those that were outside, there was a lack of access to medical care. Most were not able to see a doctor because either the women did not have any form of identification, required to be seen by a doctor, or because they lacked resources to see a doctor such as transportation and consultation fees.

“Because I don’t have money to pay” - when asked why she does not have access to medical care

4.8 Additional Vulnerabilities of Victims of Human Trafficking and Forced Labour

The findings in the previous sections report on issues related directly to human trafficking or forced labour. In this section, we report on additional challenges that we documented among the group of Sierra Leonean women in Oman that are interlinked with additional vulnerabilities.

ABILITY TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY AND RETURN HOME

The right of return is a principle under international law where an individual has the right to voluntarily return to their country of origin.⁶⁸ It is also stated in international human rights law that all victims of trafficking are entitled to return to their country of origin and it is the obligation of the country the victims are in to allow those who wish to return to do so.⁶⁹

In Oman, the employer has sole control over the domestic worker’s ability to exit Oman, unless the domestic worker has her passport with her and no “absconding” files have been charged against her. However, domestic workers who are victims of human trafficking or exploitation who leave their employer usually do not have their passports with them, and often “absconding” charges are filed against them, rendering them powerless and unable to leave. Being in this helpless situation keeps domestic workers trapped within this system. In many cases, women choose to stay in abusive working conditions because they have no other viable options, and this ultimately fuels the continued presence of exploitation and abuse in the country.

Domestic workers, trapped in this situation, are often waiting for an **amnesty** to return home. In 2021, Oman put in place an amnesty for migrant workers whose visas had expired and/or who

⁶⁸ This principle is codified in several international instruments including in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13 “Everyone has the right to leave any country [...]”.

⁶⁹ “Human Rights and Human Trafficking - OHCHR.” https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/fs36_en.pdf. Accessed 3 Mar. 2022.

had left their employer to be allowed to leave the country without the employer's consent and without paying overstay fines. However, for domestic workers to obtain this amnesty they had also to have "absconding" charges filed against them, otherwise, they did not qualify to receive amnesty. This left a large number of women trapped and unable to return home.

“ It is ok for us because like as you can see it is not really easy because we have set our minds and souls that we are going home. We are really sad but we are patient.” [...] We stay and wait again to see what Allah can do for us”

If a domestic worker is covered by an amnesty and is allowed to return home, buying her flight ticket is also another hurdle that is insurmountable without outside assistance. Unfortunately, the Embassy of Sierra Leone in Saudi Arabia, responsible for Sierra Leoneans in Oman, has no budget for flight tickets to repatriate its nationals. This means that even individuals who are legally able to leave the country are often unable to, and rely on organisations like Do Bold for support with flight tickets (see [Safe and voluntary return](#)).

During this project of 22 months, we saw only 2 Sierra Leonean women leaving the country without the employer's consent. In both cases, the workers had their passports with them and no "absconding" charges had been filed against them.

When asked if they want to return home, from the complete verified sample of 469 women, 75% stated yes, that they want to return to their home country 'as soon as possible', 23% 'not yet' and 2% 'I do not know.'

RAIDS, DETENTION AND DEPORTATION

During our work on this project, we were made aware of two raids. Raids are conducted throughout the Gulf countries to deport undocumented migrant workers. These often take place at night and outside on the streets, but it is also common for raids to happen inside buildings that are known to house migrant workers.

One of these raids took place in an apartment where approximately 13 women were staying. It happened at night during Ramadan 2021 when the police entered and detained the women without any legal justification for the arrest and without first checking their legal status. Once arrested, the women were taken to a detention centre where they had access to their phones once a week. They reported that no information was given about why they had been detained and no formal charges were made in either written or verbal form.

All the women in the group that was detained in the raid had absconded, however, some of these women had amnesty and were in the process of repatriation. All women were eventually deported. In some cases the employer had to pay the return flight ticket, and in others the flight ticket was requested by the police from the worker or worker's family. It was not clear why in some cases the employer paid for the worker's ticket and in others not, but we assume that it was related to "absconding" charges and the registration of amnesty.

“ Nobody tell us that our baba block us they only tell us if we have our tickets so if you can tell them that we have tickets so they can free us. This place is not good for us we suffer everyday no food, and someof (sic) us are sick so please help us [...]. We are begging you please [crying].”

Most workers that are detained are deported without their belongings, including their savings if they had any. Only in those cases that we are aware of and able to assist on can we get their belongings to the detention facility and support them with their air ticket home. However, this is not the norm.

In regards to detention, we came across cases where domestic workers were spending long periods in detention without any justification and without the Embassy of Sierra Leone in Saudi Arabia being informed. In two examples, one woman spent 7 months in detention and another woman 16 months. In both instances, the embassy had not been made aware and no formal charges had been filed against the women. In both cases, we facilitated the travel documents and provided the flight tickets home after we were told by prison officials that this was the only way that they would be able to return home.

DISCRIMINATION

Sierra Leonean domestic workers reported consistent racial discrimination from employers, generally in the form of verbal abuse (see **Threats, abuse, harassment and violence**).

“ They do intentionally insult me because am a black lady.”

Sierra Leonean women noted that they were also discriminated against based on their nationality. They reported that the treatment received at governmental offices differed between different nationals from African countries. For example, support for Sierra Leoneans in governmental office was absent compared to support given to nationals from Ghana or Nigeria. In one instance, a group of Sierra Leoneans was not allowed to go into an office without an explanation and waited throughout the day to enter while nationals from other African countries were allowed to enter. This group of women had to return another day.

Furthermore, the wage payment based on the nationality of the domestic worker is discriminatory. The salary suggested by recruitment offices in Oman promotes a lower salary for Sierra Leoneans compared to other nationalities who perform the same work. There is no regulation stating the minimum salary, and cases where some domestic workers receive a higher salary than their counterparts arise because of existing bilateral agreements between those countries and Oman to secure higher wages for their nationals.

EXPERIENCING EXPLOITATION WHEN LEAVING THE EMPLOYER

The majority of our community of Sierra Leonean domestic workers left their employment due to **exhaustion, wage theft, abuse** and **lack of medical care**. Many also sought help to leave their employer. We encountered groups - comprised of Sierra Leonean and other nationalities - providing support for these women to leave their employers. However, this is more of a service as it is charged for profit. In some of these cases where the women left with the support of someone else, they found themselves in another exploitative situation. For example, some were provided housing and food in exchange for working in prostitution. Others were put in other temporary homes, working as domestic workers, where part of their salary would be given to the person who “helped” them leave their former employer.

“ I stay with one madam. I have been helping this madam for doing house job just because she rescue me ... I asked him to go and ask for ticket price and he said ticket is not available until next week, or two weeks or three weeks time, just because they want me to help them doing job without no payment. So this is the problem. This is the advantage they have been seizing on me here now.”
- worker staying with a family who ‘rescued’ her after she was kicked out of her sponsor’s house at the end of her contract.

“ They tell you they will help you find a job and then charge you for that. Then, if you are working for a few months and need to rest -- they will charge you 40 rials for a few days rest. If you refuse to pay, they will drive you out.” - woman exploited by members of the Sierra Leonean community.

4.9 The Kafala System

Human trafficking and exploitation involve different forms of human rights violations. In most human rights international treaties, it is stated that states are required to provide access to remedy, even if violations are not committed by states.⁷⁰ Access to adequate and appropriate remedies, protection and justice for this group of women, unfortunately, has been close to non-existent.

THE KAFALA SYSTEM

The kafala system is the general term for the employment visa system used across the Gulf region which ties a worker’s visa and status in the country to a single employer. For domestic workers, their sponsor is their employer. The legal status of the worker is thus delegated from the state to an individual. This delegation of responsibility creates a dependency relationship where the employer has unbalanced and unchecked power and control over the worker, allowing for multiple issues to arise from this relationship. For example, employers can file an “absconding” case against the worker, even if she has not left her employer. They can also renew her contract without the approval of the domestic worker or can bring charges, such as theft, against the worker without facing scrutiny themselves.

If a domestic worker is a victim of exploitation and other forms of abuse, her only option is to leave her employer. However, under the kafala system, where there are no proper grievance mechanisms, if she leaves her abusive employer, “absconding” charges will be filed against her and she will be identified as a criminal rather than a victim of human trafficking or forced labour. On the other hand, knowing that if she leaves her employer she will be detained and deported, she may feel that she does not have an option but to stay in an exploitative situation until her contract ends.

The (legal) dominant/subservient relationship created from this situation amounts to forced labour or involuntary servitude.

⁷⁰ “Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/victimsofcrimeandabuseofpower.aspx>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2021.

“ABSCONDING” CHARGES (“RUNAWAY”)

According to Decree 189/2004, employers have to notify the relevant authorities if their domestic worker has left their employ, also known as “absconding” or “runaway”. Under the kafala system, “absconding” charges are filed against a domestic worker who has left her employer, no matter the reason why she left. These charges mean that if she is detained, she will be arrested and deported without any proper investigation made into why she left her employer.

“Absconding” charges are one of the kafala system’s greatest hindrances in preventing and addressing human trafficking and forced labour. It prevents the Omani government from identifying victims of human trafficking and providing them with appropriate protection and access to remedy and justice. Once “absconding” charges are filed against a domestic worker, she will be identified and treated as a person that has committed an offence. No investigation for the reasons why a domestic worker left her employer takes place. There are no further mechanisms to identify her as a victim of human trafficking, exploitation or any other form of abuse. Thus no one is held accountable.

“ **One house I worked for five months I was suffering no better food I decided to run the knew I wanted to run so they locked me up for a week, until the other week they easy (sic) me little I continue to work for them so they have my passport and I jumped and run away”**

Domestic workers who are exploited, facing abuse or extreme isolation with their employers or with the recruitment office, have very few options to improve their situation. For many, their best option is to leave. Despite leaving an exploitative situation that should be reported to the authorities, the majority **do not report it due to fear** of being returned to the employer.

Although the number often changes, at the time they filled out our survey, 76% of the women reported that they had left their employer or recruitment office and were outside. The main reasons they reported leaving the employer were exhaustion, non-treatment of medical issues and wage theft. A large number also reported leaving due to emotional and physical abuse and as well as a fear for their lives.

Once they left their employer or recruitment office, when possible, they relied on the wider community of Sierra Leoneans to find a place to sleep and eat until they could find another source of income and contribute to their expenses. However, in most cases, the women are not able to find sources of income and therefore struggle. Their health deteriorates and they face additional challenges such as accessing healthcare due to their legal and economic status.

“ **SL friend pays rent, she gives food, when food finish she asks for 10 rial, if no money she finds job for us for one week or so”**

“ **I stay in a unfinished house and their (sic) is a house close to where I live I go their to wash dishes and after washing the woman we give me food to eat”**

It is also worth noting that we also documented how “absconding” charges were being used as a tool by employers to avoid financial responsibility. In these cases, employers falsely filed “absconding” charges against the domestic worker while she was at home working, to absolve him/herself of the responsibility of buying the return flight ticket home at the end of the 2-year contract.

“RELEASE MONEY”

Employers or recruitment offices asking for “release money” is one of the most common practices that keeps a domestic worker bonded to her work. “Release money” refers to a fee that either the employer or office agent asks the domestic worker or her family to pay in order to “release” her from her contract and allow her to return home. This has become a common and accepted practice which is neither regulated nor prohibited.

“ When I ran out because of all these, I met a Tunisia woman who helped me talk to my sponsor and the man said I should pay him 350 rials before he can release my document to me. I later gave him 200 rials, he refused to release my document and he stopped responding to my message. I can send you proof of these.”

Almost all employers and recruitment offices who employed or sponsored women who wanted to return home before the end of their two-year contract (despite most women not having signed a contract, see [Domestic worker's work contract](#)) asked for “release money”. The main reason provided was to cover what the employer had paid to the recruitment office or to compensate the recruitment office for the money lost bringing her to Oman. The fee asked by the employers and recruitment office usually averaged 300 OMR (equivalent to around US\$780).

“ If you give me 600rys [rials] Oman money she will go but if not she will be in the police one year [to] five years if you need her to go give my back my money thank you”

With the worker responsible for covering this “release money” and her flight ticket, in addition to not receiving her complete salary or no payment at all, her possibility to return home is minimal.

In many cases when the domestic worker or family cannot pay the “release money”, employers or office agents will let her work to pay her way out. This work usually lasts between 2-4 months and it is unpaid. Also, we documented multiple instances when the worker or her family was able to pay, and the employer or office agent would then ask for an additional fee, “to cover other expenses”.

“ The last 2months before they take me to the office no salary was given to me”

“ The time I left the house I was talking to my boss and he told me I am afraid to give you the release, and then many people give me chances [to work] he talked to them but he asked a lot of money. I failed to get someone to pay that money he asked. He was asking for too much money that is why I did not get another person to be my sponsor. [...]That is why I am long time outside. Yea, and then right now I am sick that is why I want to leave. And whenever I talk to him he does not give me a chance, he is still asking for money.”

“Release money” is unregulated and the practice to ask the worker to pay for her freedom has become so normalised and accepted that in some cases it is facilitated by the police.

Note: it is important to point out that at no point did Do Bold make any “release” payments, as this would support a thriving exploitative business model and be counterproductive to the change that we are seeking.

“ Give me my money back or else no passport”

4.10 Challenges to Access Remedy, Protection and Justice

ACCESS TO GRIEVANCE MECHANISMS

The community of Sierra Leoneans that we engaged with rarely sought to report their issues to the Omani authorities. The main reason for not doing so was the fear of detention or reprisal from their employers or recruitment office staff.

Throughout the project, we helped women file grievances, either through guidance or directly on their behalf. We tried to access and use every grievance mechanism available.

In Oman, there are four mechanisms that a domestic worker can access to file complaints; the Ministry of Labour, the Oman Royal Police, The Oman Human Rights Commission, and the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking. Of the grievances available, only a few are accessible. For those accessible and for all grievances filed, no one was held accountable.

Ministry of Labour

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) can be accessed in person, online and via phone. We referred several people to use the MoL’s 24/7 emergency complaint line but no one was able to get through to anyone. We also tried unsuccessfully to help workers file complaints in person, but they were either turned away or not supported at all. In one case, it was noted that officials from the Ministry of Labour were requiring women who went to file complaints, to pay back their sponsor for them to be allowed to return home (see “**release money**”). Accessing a complaint mechanism online didn’t provide a clear way forward or how the process would go.

Furthermore, COVID restrictions added a layer of complexity to these issues. From November 2021, everyone who required access to the MoL must be vaccinated. Only a small number of workers who have left their employers have been vaccinated, leaving a large percentage of the community unable to access the MoL, which is responsible not only for submitting grievances but also for providing other crucial services to these workers.

Oman Royal Police

The Oman Royal Police can be accessed in person or via phone. Due to language barriers, via phone is often not an option. Therefore, most women sought help in person by going to the police station. The most common response was for the police to call the worker's employer and be taken back. In other instances, the women were detained for "absconding" and no investigations were made.

From all the cases we monitored no one was able to file a grievance or complaint against their employer. There was only one exception when a worker sought support from the police when the employer refused to buy the worker's ticket home after finishing her two-year contract. In this case, the police contacted the employer to ensure that the ticket would be provided.

ADAMA'S STORY

Adama*, a domestic worker, reported to us that she was being physically abused. She provided audio evidence of being **flogged** by her employer and provided pictures of her **skin being "pinched"**. She **had not been paid** for four months and her phone **SIM was blocked** for periods of time. She asked us to report her situation to the authorities saying "[I] am dying of pain [...] anytime ma my life is in danger". We reported her situation to the police, with the evidence, passport picture, and employer's address. The police responded immediately. According to the police, they went to the employer's home and told the employer to pay all dues, to stop hitting Adama, and that if Adama wanted to return home she should be allowed to, that she just had to cover her own return ticket. After this, the police left the employer's home. Adama never spoke nor saw the police, she was in her room during this time. After the police visit, she was **locked in her room** without food. One month after reporting her case to the police, she wrote "These days they ask me to take heavy wood and after I started feeling pain in my hand [...] my sponsor said I should work with them for this month and call my family to buy me my ticket and return home". We lost contact with her two weeks after this message and we were never able to get in contact with her again.

Besides government shelters, foreign embassies in Oman can open a shelter on their premises to protect their nationals. However, Sierra Leone does not have an embassy in Oman. None of the women of the Sierra Leonean community had accessed a shelter or any other form of protection provided by the Government or other organisations.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORTS

Access to justice can be defined as the ability for a person to use existing legal processes that are just and equitable, to protect their rights and provide redress where their rights might have been wronged.⁷³ The right to have access to justice is accepted in various international and regional human rights instruments, including in the Arab Charter on Human Rights.⁷⁴

Women migrant domestic workers, victims of human trafficking, forced labour or other forms of exploitation must, in particular, have the right to equal access to justice, equal use of investigations process and accountability measures and provision of remedy as Omani nationals.

Access to justice in Oman, for domestic workers, is elusive. Limiting elements include a lack of protective regulations for domestic workers (including undocumented domestic workers), enforcement of existing regulations and monitoring of recruiting offices and employer's practices. There are no appropriate investigations into allegations filed by domestic workers nor proper accountability measures to address the issues. Also, there is a lack of protection to offer to domestic workers that would otherwise allow them to submit complaints free from fear of any form of retaliation.

Furthermore, there are no "firewalls" between elements of enforcement of the kafala system and its 2008 anti-human trafficking law, resulting in domestic workers and those undocumented, from accessing justice. Other obstacles also include the lack of legal aid and advice and the lack of familiarity with the legal system, coupled with the complexity of accessing the platforms available to submit a complaint. It is not "user-friendly".

In regards to accessing justice during detention, due process must also be guaranteed. Among others, as a minimum, it should include the right to be informed of reasons for detention, access to legal aid must be provided, the right to inform a person of her choice of her detention, the responsibility to inform the relevant embassy and have consular access and the right to an effective investigation and when required, reparations. This due process is non-existent for the vast majority of domestic workers detained.

⁷³ "Access to justice for migrants and asylum seekers in Europe ... - Coe." <https://rm.coe.int/1680597b1a>. Accessed 6 May. 2022.

⁷⁴ Arab Charter on Human Rights (adopted 15 September 1994).

5. DO BOLD'S EFFORTS TO SUPPORT VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND FORCED LABOUR

During our project, the extent of support needed was evident. In addition to our research, we focused on providing as much protection and support as possible to those women we identified as victims of human trafficking and/or exploitation, carefully considering the context of every case and our resources. In total, we provided 1091 instances of support, which ranged from safe and voluntary repatriation to negotiations with employers and providing referrals for reintegration support.

5.1 Repatriation support

SAFE AND VOLUNTARY RETURN

With limited access to protection mechanisms, such as shelter or medical care, the vast majority of support requests by this group of women was to return home. All repatriations we supported were voluntary unless the support was related to assisting those being deported.

We supported a total of 749 repatriations of Sierra Leonean women by covering PCR test fees in either Oman or Sierra Leone, organising travel documents, supporting with amnesty registration, coordinating ground transportation in both Oman and Sierra Leone, support during departure at the airport, coordinating support upon arrival, referring the women to other organisations for reintegration support and/or providing pocket money upon their return to cover their basic needs upon returning (usually in the form of a **Soft landing kits**). From this group, we covered the repatriation of 108 women, meaning that we covered at least their flight tickets.

The repatriation process is complex and differs according to individual circumstances, some were simple, such as helping them acquire amnesty, travel documents and cover repatriation expenses, while others were more complicated such as negotiating with employers or supporting women with certain health conditions.

ABIBATU'S STORY

Abibatu* was recruited in Sierra Leone to work as a domestic worker in Oman. **Her father paid the recruiter** approximately US\$730 to help her get to Oman. Abibatu's recruiter then directed her to travel to Guinea to finalise her migration and fly to Oman. At that point, he demanded that she pay an additional 270 USD for the final expenses. Her father sent the money.

When she arrived, Abibatu started work as a domestic worker at her employer's home. After almost three months, her employer took her for the medical tests required to transfer her visa from the office to them.

This time, Abibatu failed the medical test: it showed she was HIV positive and therefore deemed “unfit” to stay in Oman. Abibatu was legally required to return home.

Because of Abibatu’s condition, her employer took her back to the office. The office staff told her she had to return at her own expense, although it is the responsibility of the recruiting office.⁷⁵ The office then called her family and told them that, for Abibatu to return, they had to pay her flight back, threatening that otherwise she would be deported.

To help Abibatu return home, her father took out a loan. He sent the office the equivalent of US\$470. But when the money arrived, the office staff told him he needed to send US\$210 more to cover the increasing cost of the flight ticket and the required COVID-19 tests. Abibatu shared:

“ When I spoke with my father, I said ‘They wanted to deport me.’ So, my father was afraid [...] they would do something bad to me [...] That’s why my father sent the money, because he doesn’t know. I didn’t go to school, my father didn’t go to school [...] So my father sent the money and said they should let me go. But now they hold me and they haven’t bought the ticket.”

To support Abibatu to return home, Do Bold negotiated with the office for us to purchase her flight ticket, with the agreement that the money Abibatu’s father had sent would be returned to her.

Two days before her flight, Abibatu took the PCR test required for travelling and tested positive for COVID. This meant that she had to return to the office and wait at least 14 days to take a new PCR test. Upon Abibatu’s request, the staff gave her 30 rials (a total of approximately US\$80) from the money her father sent to buy food and necessities for herself.

Three weeks later, she received a negative COVID test. We re-booked her flight, and she returned home. By the time she left the country, Abibatu had been in the office for two months. Before going to the airport, the office gave her 100 USD from the money her father had sent. They kept the remaining 290 USD.

Once she arrived in Sierra Leone, Do Bold provided her with a Soft Landing Kit and a referral to World Hope International, an international organisation with an office in Freetown that works with victims of human trafficking.

A note about repatriation. Repatriation can remediate the victim’s immediate circumstances and avoid further exploitation and restore their dignity and to some extent their wellbeing. However, we also understand that upon returning home, victims of human trafficking and/or exploitation face considerable challenges, from social, mental and medical issues to having to face debts incurred.

⁷⁵ According to the standard domestic work contract

DO BOLD'S EFFORTS AS OF MARCH 6, 2022



REPATRIATIONS

749
instances of repatriation support

108
women repatriated

28
women referred for reintegration support to our partner organisations in Sierra Leone

4
women who were in prison/detention repatriated



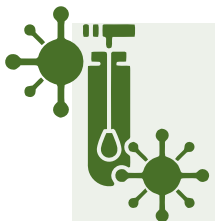
86
Soft Landing Kits provided



NEGOTIATIONS

36
Negotiations carried out with employers or recruitment office staff for the release of workers

22
women's release secured



PCR TESTS

55
PCR tests covered upon arrival in Sierra Leone

37
PCR test waivers organized

46
pre-departure PCR tests covered

28
PCR test discounts arranged

Collaborated with a hospital in Oman to provide PCR tests with only an Emergency Travel Certificate as a form of identification (most facilities required a passport)



SUPPORT

1091
instances of support provided

11
women provided with ground transportation

Empowered and supported hundreds of women to talk to their employers, go to the police, or go to the Ministry of Labour, and apply for their own amnesties or find out about their legal status



27
women have been provided with a volunteer to help facilitate the departure proceedings

28
women supported to obtain their identity information (they previously had no access to their passport, IDs, or copies of them)



139

Emergency Travel Certificates obtained

174

women registered for amnesty



135

women supported to check their qualifications for amnesty

AMNESTY REGISTRATIONS

On November 15th, 2020, the Government of Oman announced an amnesty for all workers whose visa had expired and/or who had left their employer. Initially, the deadline was December 31st of the same year, but this amnesty continued throughout the year 2021 with registration finishing on December 31st, 2021, and those registered allowed to leave until the end of January 2022.

Until the end of March 2021, a worker could register at the Sanad office, at the Ministry of Labour, or online. From April 2021 registration for this amnesty had to be done only in person, at the Ministry of Labour, unless a worker knew her Civil ID number, in which case registration could still be done online or at a Sanad Office.

Before the end of March 2021, we guided the women on where to go, what to bring, and what to say to obtain the amnesty. Everyone at this time was guided to go to Sanad office as these were more accessible in distance and the women were less afraid to go there. We also registered as many as possible using the Ministry of Labour's online portal.

Between March 2021 and November 2021, the amnesty registration was closed and our focus was on providing repatriation support for those registered with the amnesty and continuing negotiations for those that weren't.

After November 2021, when the registration period reopened, the Ministry of Labour was not easily accessible because only vaccinated people were allowed to enter the premises. Additionally, it was no longer possible to register for amnesty online, unless a worker had a copy of her civil ID, which only a handful of the women did. Therefore, from this date until the end of the amnesty, we relied on volunteers and community leaders to register women for the amnesty by volunteers personally going with the women's information to the Ministry of Labour and completing the procedures. This process finished on December 31st, 2021.

In total, we supported 174 people to register for amnesty and checked the amnesty qualifications of an additional 135 people who were unable to register.

It is important to note that for a domestic worker to obtain amnesty, her employer must have filed "absconding" charges against her, otherwise, the amnesty would not apply. Additionally, if a worker did not have copies of any of her identity documents, which many people did not have due to **passport confiscation**, she had to undergo a complicated process of fingerprinting to register, a process that remained unclear to us and the workers for the duration of the amnesty registration period.

ISSUANCE OF EMERGENCY TRAVEL CERTIFICATES

Only five women who we repatriated with amnesty had their passports with them. For all others, we supported them by obtaining an Emergency Travel Certificate (ETC), a document used in place of a passport for a person to travel to their home country. The process involved obtaining each person's passport information (via either a copy of their passport or requesting each piece of information) and a passport photo before passing this information on to the Embassy of Sierra

Leone in Saudi Arabia. We then arranged to receive the documents in Oman and distributed them to the women. In total, we supported 139 women to obtain an ETC.⁷⁶

PCR TEST FEE COVERAGE IN OMAN

One of the travel elements that changed worldwide due to COVID-19 is the requirement of PCR tests before travelling and/or upon arrival. For our work, this meant extra financial resources needed and an extra layer of work to ensure their safe departure from Oman and back to Sierra Leone.

Many of the women had no money to pay the 15-25 OMR (US\$39-\$65) for the PCR test required to check-in for the flight. To address this, we worked with a local hospital where we were able to transfer funds for these tests and in addition, the hospital provided a discount to the women who were victims of trafficking and/or exploitation. Through this partnership, we were able to cover 46 PCR tests.

However, financial resources to cover these fees were not the only challenge. Hospitals are required to see an ID for them to have a PCR test. Most hospitals did not accept their ETCs, which was their only form of identification available to the women. For this, we also worked with the same hospital to ensure that the ETC was sufficient for the women to obtain a PCR test.

PCR TEST FEE COVERAGE IN SIERRA LEONE

Another requirement to fly from Oman to Sierra Leone, was the submission of a QR code upon check-in at the airport in Oman with proof that the “Health Declaration” for Sierra Leone has been paid. The “Health Declaration” is a form for a PCR test that is done upon arrival in Sierra Leone but paid before boarding. At the beginning of our project in October 2020, the women travelling back were able to board their flights in Oman without the “Health Declaration”, but upon arrival in Sierra Leone, their passports were confiscated by the Sierra Leonean Airport Authorities until a payment of LE 800,000 (between US\$70-\$80) was made.

On March 21, 2021, the Embassy of Sierra Leone in Saudi and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in Freetown, Sierra Leone, agreed on a Memorandum to waive the “Health Declaration” fees for domestic workers being repatriated from Oman. Through this Memorandum, we were able to provide waivers to 37 women. This waiver was in place until June 24, 2021.⁷⁷

From then on, payments had to be made for everyone being repatriated. In total, we covered the PCR tests for 55 women in Sierra Leone.⁷⁸

AIRPORT SUPPORT IN OMAN

We coordinated airport support for at least 27 Sierra Leonean women. Airport volunteers were essential to the smooth departure for many of the women. This support was essential because most of the women were not familiar with airport procedures (procedures which consistently

⁷⁶ Unfortunately, we did not have the financial capacity to repatriate all of those who we helped obtain ETCs while others decided they would stay in Oman for longer.

⁷⁷ “Imposition of Mandatory Cost of COVID-19 Test” REF: 14929/ADM issued by Sierra Leone Government on 24 June 2021.

⁷⁸ As of March 6, 2022

changed due to COVID-19 precautions), administrative procedures with the Ministry of Labour, had no common language with airport officials and were sometimes subjected to discrimination based on their race and status as domestic workers.

Our airport volunteer supported the women through the check-in procedures. In cases where the worker had amnesty, the volunteer supported her to go through the procedures with the Ministry of Labour desk at the airport. In cases where the worker was meeting a representative of their employer or office in the airport to exchange documents and complete departure procedures, the volunteer provided support for the woman during the meeting and ensured she was able to leave. In some cases, volunteers provided, from their own pockets, payments for printing costs, Health Declarations and baggage overweight fees.

In multiple cases, with our travel agency, we supported women in addressing grievances with airlines, including issues related to baggage and discriminatory practices such as not allowing them to board their transit flights or keeping them waiting until they had no choice but to leave their baggage behind to be able to catch their flight.

5.2 Negotiations with Recruitment Office Staff and Employers

From the group of women, 12% of them were living with and working for their sponsors and 10% were working for a family that the office placed them with but who was not their sponsor. that was not their sponsor (both situations are referred to by them as being “inside”), while 2% were in recruitment offices.

We found that the vast majority of Sierra Leonean women were being overworked, more than half were victims of wage theft, and a large number of women were subjected to harassment and their living conditions were inappropriate. Understanding that leaving the employer had negative consequences, many of them wanted to return home.

When a domestic worker reached out to us in this situation, we supported them by either guiding her on how to talk to their employer or recruitment office staff for them to “allow” her to return home, and when needed, by communicating directly with the employer or recruitment office staff to reach an agreement. Throughout this project, we have negotiated on behalf of at least 36 women and secured the release of 22 women.

Negotiations last anything between a few days to several months, and the objective is for the employer or recruitment office to allow her to leave without having to pay “release money”. In almost all cases an agreement for the worker was reached but the response from employers or recruitment offices varied. In some cases, the employer responded by not paying the remaining salaries, and the recruitment offices responded by sending her to work in other temporary homes and withholding her salary before allowing her to return home. In some cases, they agreed, for example, to leave after a certain date such as the end of Ramadan and in other cases, they did not agree.

BILKESU'S STORY

In September 2021, Bilkesu* reached out to Do Bold. During the communication period, Bilkesu was not working or living with her employer, and she did not have an “absconding” case against her, meaning she was not allowed to leave with the amnesty. She had left her employment due to overwork, physical abuse and threats.

She had not been feeling well for the past month and needed to consult with a doctor. After securing a doctor's visit and a few tests, Bilkesu was diagnosed with advanced cancer. The doctor's main advice for Bilkesu was to return home to Sierra Leone, as required cancer treatments are only available within Omani government hospitals, which only admit patients whose papers are all in order.

As Bilkesu required either a ‘clearance’ or her passport from her employer to leave Oman, we contacted the employer. Even though we informed the employer that all costs for Bilkesu to return home would be covered by us, the employer refused to return Bilkesu's passport to allow her to return home. The employer wanted ‘refunds’ on medical and living costs accumulated by Bilkesu, while she was working. The employer insisted on negotiating the release of Bilkesu's passport for a price and we were not successful.

With her cancer symptoms worsening, we secured her travel documents from the Sierra Leonean Embassy in Saudi Arabia and a volunteer went with Bilkesu to the Ministry of Labour. The doctor's diagnosis was presented to the Ministry of Labour and they reached out to the employer. The employer still refused to turn in her passport to the MoL. At this point, the MoL had to circumvent the system and put everything in place for Bilkesu to travel. In late October Bilkesu arrived in Sierra Leone, where she is currently receiving care with the help of a local organisation.

5.3 Empowerment

COMMUNITY BUILDING

One of the main threats that domestic workers face working in their employers' home is isolation. We wanted to make sure that no one felt left behind and that everyone understood that they are not alone. For the success of this project, building a safe and trusting environment was a key element for their wellbeing and for us to work together.

We built an online community of 656 women. This group is still open and it is accessible to all Sierra Leonean women in Oman, regardless of their specific circumstances. This group is used to share information and updates as well as to encourage each other, check on each other, keep each other company, and raise awareness.

This group is kept safe by screening each new person joining the group and continuously monitoring its content.

AWARENESS RAISING

It is very difficult to navigate issues relevant to domestic workers in Oman, and a lot of the Sierra Leonean women do not know how to overcome many of the issues that affect them. We always

receive questions on how to return home, how to get their passport back, how to terminate their contract or how to change employers.

To address these questions, we have live Q&A sessions where they can ask any questions and we try to answer as best as we can with as much detailed information as possible. We also present different solutions with different outcomes as well as consequences that might be tied to it.

Through awareness-raising, not only do we focus on answering questions, but we also make sure to break down complicated issues into more manageable steps and to make sure that misinformation is addressed when needed.

PROMOTING THEIR VOICE AND VISIBILITY

This community often requests that we help ensure that people, especially those in power, hear their stories. Much of our efforts have been focused on making the women and their situations more visible. With their consent, we have shared their stories. We have been able to raise their voices through the release of a **music album** where they share their hopes, dreams, and realities.⁷⁹ We have also been able to shed light on their experiences by supporting the publication of articles in major outlets, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Guardian newspaper.

5.4 Reintegration, Justice, and Accountability

REINTEGRATION REFERRALS

As Sierra Leonean women victims of human trafficking and other forms of exploitation were returning to Sierra Leone, we wanted to ensure that the necessary support would be provided for their reintegration and/or prevention of re-trafficking.

For those most considered vulnerable and with their permission, the women were referred to World Hope International to provide the relevant support required. We referred a total of 28 women, women who had experienced different forms of extreme abuse or whose physical or mental health had deteriorated.

For all Sierra Leonean women who returned from Oman and were in Makeni city, we referred them to the Domestic Workers Advocacy Network, an organisation focusing on reintegration, awareness and economic empowerment.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SIERRA LEONE

We researched to understand the recruitment process in Sierra Leone, including the profile of the recruiter. We asked the women whether they wanted to seek justice and investigate suspected traffickers. From women who wanted to seek justice and who were repatriated, we compiled evidence and relevant information which was then passed to the appropriate authorities in Sierra Leone to open investigations.

⁷⁹This music album was put together by the women to share with the crowdfunding donors that supported the repatriation of 42 women. You can listen to it here: <https://soundcloud.com/do-bold/sets/freedom-for-our-sisters>

In 2021, there was one human trafficking conviction in Sierra Leone related to trafficking between Sierra Leone and Oman; however, details of the case are not public and cannot be shared, thus it is unclear if this conviction was due to our efforts or not.

5.5 Basic Assistance

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

Medical assistance has been a continuous need throughout the project. From assisting pregnancies to accidents, medical support was one of the biggest and most immediate needs for this group of women. However, since the majority did not have any form of identification with them or because they were inside their employer's home, access to medical support was always a challenge. The hospital that we established a partnership with received a woman in a critical condition using a copy of her identity document. For everyone else needing medical support, we worked with a nurse to advise the woman via WhatsApp, using audio and videos, on what best to do depending on the situation. The most common symptoms among the women were extreme fatigue and weight loss as well as chest pain, difficulty in breathing, body aches and pains, inflammation of body parts, congestion, fever, and skin issues.

FOOD

During the peak of COVID-19 in 2021, women who had left their employer or recruitment office and were outside often requested food. We also work on organising food deliveries to be provided by individual and group volunteers in Oman to different locations throughout Muscat where the women were staying.

TRANSPORTATION

The majority of the women that have been assisted through this project have limited or no financial security. Throughout this time, women needed to reach government offices, hospitals, and the airport. We assisted with transportation through individual volunteers as well paying for taxi services.

SOFT LANDING KITS

Soft Landing Kits consisted of US\$120 cash sent to some women who were repatriated from Oman to Sierra Leone. The vast majority of the women we supported arrived back in Sierra Leone with less than what they had left with. This is why the Soft Landing Kits were introduced. These kits provided essential financial support to help them travel from the airport to their hometown if they were not in Freetown or to buy necessities such as food and a phone SIM. In total, we provided 86 women with a Soft Landing Kit.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

This project has aimed at understanding and documenting the experience of Sierra Leonean women domestic workers in Oman victims of human trafficking and other forms of exploitation, but it also aims to provide recommendations that are most effective in preventing and addressing the issues identified.

There is great concern for the safety and wellbeing of women domestic workers in Oman from Sierra Leone and we welcome a positive and immediate intervention to prevent and address human trafficking and forced labour experienced by this community. We encourage the governments of Oman and Sierra Leone to take the necessary steps to prevent further human trafficking and exploitation, strengthen their protection for victims, and hold those responsible accountable.

Based on the RT & NRT data collected and analysed, combined with our engagement with the community for 22 months, we put forward a set of 15 comprehensive recommendations directed to Oman. These recommendations are divided in two sections: Legal framework recommendations (8 recommendations), and recommendations for implementation and enforcement (7 recommendations). In addition, we have drafted 6 recommendations directed to Sierra Leone to strengthen implementation and enforcement. Based on our insights gathered over the monitoring period, we have drafted two recommendations that are addressed to both countries to respond to the current situation.

All of the recommendations mentioned above (total 23) are by no means exhaustive and they may not provide answers to all existing issues. As foundational elements, our recommendations are meant to serve involved governments as a blueprint, supporting them in addressing some of the most severe issues surrounding human rights abuses identified.

This research has been conducted in Oman, leading to a draft of detailed and comprehensive recommendations directed towards Oman. Recommendations, which are directed towards Sierra Leone are based on recruitment, repatriation and reintegration data as well as secondary data.⁸⁰ Accordingly, those recommendations are more broad in nature. We recommend further research on the ground in Sierra Leone, leading to more detailed recommendations.

6.1 Recommendations to the Government of Oman

The following recommendations provide a framework for the Government of Oman to effectively protect the domestic work sector and address human trafficking, forced labour and other forms of exploitation, both at a policy and implementation level. These 15 recommendations have been drafted to address the grave violations found in our research and investigations.

⁸⁰ Secondary data includes: National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (2021-2023), Sierra Leone National Task Force on Human Trafficking; Sierra Leone Labour Migration Policy, Ministry of Labour and Social Security & Strategy and Policy Unit; National Review Report of the Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration in Sierra Leone, 2020, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation; National Migration Policy for Sierra Leone, 2022, Sierra Leone Immigration Department and Ministry of Internal Affairs

LEGAL FRAMEWORK RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations aim at closing the gaps in the legal framework and address incompatible laws and normalised practices that facilitate the prevalence of human trafficking and/or forced labour.

1. Decriminalise “absconding”, and reform laws accordingly so workers can leave abusive employment conditions and situations of forced labour without a penalty (issues addressed: “Absconding” charges (“runaway”), Forced labour and Additional vulnerabilities).

The fear for domestic workers of having “absconding” charges filed against them and being arrested and deported keeps domestic workers in exploitative situations such as forced labour. In addition, “absconding” charges filed against domestic workers prevent the Government from effectively identifying victims of human trafficking, addressing forced labour and other forms of exploitation, and from holding accountable those responsible. We recommend:

- » **Completely decriminalising “absconding” with no interim steps.** Decriminalising “absconding” charges is a fundamental step for addressing forced labour and other forms of abuse and exploitation directly. However, for this step to be effective, it must be done in tandem with the following recommendations:
 - **Ensure legal protection of domestic workers**
 - **Prohibit request of “release money”**
 - **Create a comprehensive and accessible grievance mechanism for domestic workers**
 - **Create a monitoring team**
 - **Strengthen regulations around recruitment offices**

2. Prohibit the request, facilitation and receipt of “release money” to prevent forced labour and abusive working and living conditions (issues addressed: “Release money”, Forced labour and Living and working conditions).

The state-sanctioned practice of requesting “release money” allows recruitment offices and employers to avoid any financial loss whether or not domestic workers have been subjected to exploitative practices, abusive living conditions, or wage theft. Acceptance of this practice allows situations of forced labour and other forms of exploitation to continue and thrive. We recommend:

- » **Drafting and approving a regulation that clearly prohibits the request, facilitation and receipt of “release money” by both employers and recruitment offices.** Clearly prohibit employers and recruitment offices from asking domestic workers, their families or friends, to pay “release money” in exchange for allowing the worker to return home or change employment and must include the penalties related to requesting, facilitating and receiving “release money”. This regulation must be published on government sites, be available and accessible, and awareness of it must be promoted through government messaging or campaigns.

- » **Clearly defining and raising awareness of the penalties for those requesting, receiving, and/or facilitating “release money”.** Note: It is important that the actual paying of “release money” itself is not criminalised, only the requesting, facilitating, and receiving of “release money”, as this could lead to criminalising workers who were in exploitative conditions.
- » **Prohibiting employers and recruitment offices from asking or forcing domestic workers to work without pay or to pay their way out of their employment relationship.** Forcing a domestic worker to work her way out of the working relationship is an element that can constitute **forced labour** or debt bondage.
- » **Implementing this recommendation together with the recommendation on strengthening regulations of, and for recruitment offices.** This recommendation will be more effective if it is implemented together with the efforts to decrease recruitment costs (see **Strengthen regulations around recruitment offices**).

3. Ensure legal protection and better working and living conditions for domestic workers through a comprehensive domestic workers’ law and work contract (issues addressed: **Forced labour, Work contract, and Working and living conditions**).

Efforts made to protect domestic workers are currently not sufficient. We recommend drafting a new comprehensive domestic workers’ law and work contract, or revising Ministerial Decree 189/2004 and the domestic work contract, replacing all unconscionable clauses and addressing the current gaps to ensure protection and better working and living conditions. In particular:

- » **Allow domestic workers to terminate a working contract without employers’ consent.** This process must allow the domestic worker to:
 - Terminate their work contract at any time and without having to provide a reason. The termination has to be done with due notice and it can be in verbal or written form
 - Leave and terminate a contract immediately if abuse is present. All allegations of abuse must be investigated by the relevant authorities with cooperation from the domestic worker and employer. If abuse is found, the employer must be held accountable, must pay lost and/or unpaid wages, and cover the domestic workers’ return ticket if she wishes to return home
 - Have access to a **grievance mechanism** to file a complaint for unpaid wages before or after leaving the employer as well if the worker decides to stay with the employer. The employer must present proof showing that the worker has received all of her dues, otherwise, the Government must compel the employer to pay owed salaries immediately. If the employer refuses to pay the due, the Government of Oman must assume responsibility for an alternative remedy, which should include her lost wages and return ticket costs if she wishes to return home. Domestic workers should not be required to stay in the country while waiting for a resolution to their grievance and provisions should be made for them to receive wages due, even if they have returned home.

- Have a grace period to find another employer or return home without losing her valid immigration status upon termination of employment
 - Return home without any legal charges filed against the domestic worker, immigration fines or detention.
- » **Allow domestic workers to change employers without the consent of their current employer.** This will protect domestic workers by enabling them to leave abusive employment relationships and prevent forced labour. In addition, it will create a healthier domestic work sector as employers will have to provide decent working and living conditions, understanding that their domestic workers will leave if these are not respected. For this to work, a system must be set up in which the visa can be transferred to a new employer without the current employers' consent, and employers seeking to hire domestic workers can legally hire them directly, without relying on recruiting offices. Not allowing an employee to change employers essentially requires her to stay with an employer, which supports the prevalence of **forced labour**.
- » **Make it mandatory for employers to provide health insurance when employing a domestic worker.** All employers must provide valid health insurance for all domestic workers they are employing. Employers must provide domestic workers with health insurance from the beginning of their contract and this must be processed at the same time as the worker's residence visa. No domestic worker should be allowed to work without proper health insurance.
- » **Include key provisions aligned with best practices for better working and living conditions.** Domestic workers' laws and contracts must contain clear information relevant to working conditions, including a minimum wage for all domestic workers, maximum working hours within 24 hours, minimum daily rest periods, a mandatory weekly day off, allowance for the worker to leave the house when she is not on duty, overtime compensation, list of work duties including those that are not part of her duties (e.g. work for extended members of the sponsor's family, take care of farm animals, massages, any tasks that can lead to an accident such as climbing tall ladders) and living conditions (e.g., all domestic workers must be provided with internet access, a private room and sufficient fresh food and drinks).
- » **Provide a 90 day probation period where a domestic worker can return to her office within 90 days of commencing work if she wishes to change employers.** The domestic worker should have the same right as the employer to a probation period and be allowed to return to the recruitment office, without having to state her reasons.
- » **Make signatures from both the employer and worker compulsory for all domestic workers' contracts to be enforceable.** The process of signing must take place in front of an authorised official with both the employer and domestic worker present. During this process the relevant official must ensure that the domestic worker is signing the contract in a language that she understands, and that she verbally acknowledges that she understands the contract and the working conditions. The relevant authority must ensure the domestic workers' understanding and sign the contract to verify this process. A copy of this contract must be immediately provided to both parties.

» **Make it mandatory for both employers and domestic workers to keep a daily record of working hours and a record of monthly salary payments to be signed by both parties.**

The working hours record should be available to both parties and must be presented in the event of any dispute, and during the labour visits (see **Monitoring**). The starting and finish time must be recorded with both signatures. The monthly payments must also be signed and include the total payment received. To avoid falsifying these records, the signature must be identical to the passport's signature and if the hours or salary are different then what is being signed the domestic worker must have access to the grievance mechanism to raise this issue.

4. Ensure protection for domestic workers against forced labour and other forms of labour exploitation by extending the Labour Law to include domestic work (issues addressed: **Forced labour).**

The inclusion of domestic workers under the labour law will provide the basic protection needed, equal to all other workers, against forced labour and other forms of exploitation. It would address and limit the weekly maximum working hours, and minimum daily rest, paid annual leave, and wage. It would provide conditions that are not less favourable than those applicable to other workers. In addition, including domestic workers under the labour law would improve overall attitudes to and perceptions of domestic workers and their role in the country.

However, there are still gaps within the labour law that prevent certain issues specifically affecting domestic workers from being addressed. Therefore, while we believe that a comprehensive domestic worker law would address more of the specific issues affecting domestic workers, domestic workers must still be considered workers and be covered by the labour law. Covering domestic workers by the labour law would be a positive step towards offering protection from exploitative working and living conditions to a sector that is currently excluded from such protections

5. Strengthen the implementation of existing anti-human trafficking laws and protocols to address human trafficking (issues addressed: **Human trafficking).**

Oman has continuously striven to improve efforts to combat human trafficking, particularly through the passage of the anti-human trafficking law. However, we believe that there are measures that require further attention and strengthening to effectively prevent and address human trafficking. In particular, we recommend strengthening measures to prevent and respond to trafficking in accordance with the UN Trafficking Protocol (accessed in 2005) including measures to:⁸¹

- Effectively identify victims of human trafficking;
- Provide accessible and immediate protection and support to potential victims of human trafficking;
- Provide legal assistance, including temporary residency to victims of human trafficking, when needed, and;
- Ensure that potential victims of human trafficking are not criminalised due to their immigration status or "absconding" charges.

⁸¹ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000

In addition to strengthening laws and regulations in accordance with the UN Trafficking Protocol, we also recommend the implementation and enforcement of the Anti-Trafficking Law to ensure that all victims are protected. We recommend that the relevant authorities:

- Strengthen investigations and prosecutions of those responsible for human trafficking, including labour trafficking;
- Strengthen research into the root causes of human trafficking and labour exploitation of domestic workers in Oman in order to more effectively address the root problems.

6. Strengthen regulation and enforcement measures of recruitment offices to address recruitment-related abuses (Issues addressed: Human trafficking, Forced labour and Recruitment offices in Oman).

Even though the initial recruitment of domestic workers happens in Sierra Leone, Oman has a responsibility to provide adequate protection for and prevent abuses of migrant workers in its territory by recruitment offices. To strengthen regulation of recruitment offices we recommend:

- » **Imposing strict regulations for recruitment offices to receive or extend their operating licences.** To obtain or extend a license to operate as a recruiting office, it should be mandatory to have in place a human rights-focused due diligence system for their recruitment activities. This, for example, includes a human rights policy that protects domestic workers from any abuse. Along with this policy, the relevant steps for its implementation must also be documented.
- » **Introducing new regulations by which the recruitment offices must ensure that domestic workers have not paid recruitment fees in the origin country.** Strict regulations must be in place whereby the recruitment office in Oman is responsible for working only with licensed and ethical recruitment agencies from sending countries. If recruitment agencies from sending countries are found charging recruitment fees, the recruitment office in Oman should be responsible for providing remedy for the workers by returning the fees paid and changing working partners. The recruitment office in Oman should be held accountable for facilitating human trafficking, forced labour or debt bondage if they knowingly fail to remedy the worker and/or change partners. To prevent recruitment fees in the origin country, recruiting offices in Oman must strictly vet recruitment agencies in the origin country to ensure that domestic workers working in Oman are recruited ethically.
- » **Requiring recruiting offices to ensure that domestic workers are not deceived concerning their working and living conditions, wages, or destination country.** Recruiting offices in Oman must take the necessary steps to ensure that the working and living conditions that domestic workers are recruited for in Oman are the same as those being promised in their origin country. Otherwise, the recruiting office in Oman is responsible for providing a return flight ticket to the origin country. If the recruitment office is found to place the domestic worker with an employer even after deception is reported by the worker, the recruitment office must be held accountable as this practice promotes human trafficking and forced labour. To prevent deception in the origin country, recruiting offices in Oman must strictly vet recruitment agencies in the origin country to ensure that domestic workers working in Oman are recruited ethically.

- » **Ensuring that recruitment offices are covering the cost to repatriate workers who fail the government medical tests.** As it is required by Ministerial Order No. 189 of 2004 and the domestic work contract recruitment offices are responsible for the return flight ticket of domestic workers who have failed the medical test. It must also be ensured that the flight ticket fees are not demanded from workers or their families. Accountability must be upheld if the recruitment office is found to be doing so.
- » **Introducing regulations around the recruitment fees charged to employers to employ domestic workers.** Fees paid by employers to recruitment offices must be regulated. These regulations should support a healthy business sector and fees must be transparent for those who seek those services.
- » **Considering a grading scheme for recruitment offices to encourage better practices.** A grading scheme can be based on the number of **complaints** received from both workers and employers against recruitment offices. If this information is available to the public it may incentivise better practices. (Must be implemented in tandem with creating a grievance mechanism, see Recommendation 2.1.)

7. Ensure clear regulations are in place that prohibit employers from confiscating or withholding any personal documents to address the widespread practice of confiscating domestic workers' passports (issues addressed: **Confiscation or retention of identity documents**).

It has been observed that different reports and articles mention a circular that prohibits the confiscation and withholding of workers' passports, including those of domestic workers.⁸² However, this circular is not publicly available and thus it is not clear whether it is actually prohibited. Nevertheless, it is important to monitor and enforce the prohibition of confiscating and withholding workers' passports as it is a common practice. We recommend:

- » **Prohibiting and criminalising the confiscation and withholding of a domestic worker's documents.** A regulation must be in place to prohibit the confiscation and/or withholding of domestic workers. This regulation should also state the penalties when and if an employer or recruitment office is found to have confiscated and/or is withholding a domestic worker's documents. This regulation must be monitored and strictly enforced.

It is important to make sure that this prohibition is clear and communicated to recruitment offices and society through awareness raising campaigns. In addition, continuous monitoring must be in place, holding accountable those responsible for confiscating domestic workers' passports and contributing (knowingly or otherwise) to human trafficking and forced labour.

8. Criminalise all forms of violence in the workplace, including the domestic work sector, to address all forms of violence and harassment (issues addressed: **Threats, abuse, harassment and violence**).

In Oman there are no laws that specifically protect domestic workers from workplace violence or harassment. We recommend:

⁸² "I Was Sold": Abuse and Exploitation of Migrant Domestic Workers in ...". 13 Jul. 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/13/i-was-sold/abuse-and-exploitation-migrant-domestic-workers-oman>. Accessed 19 April. 2022

- » Developing legislation to criminalise all forms of workplace violence and harassment that include the domestic work sector and that applies to both recruiting offices and homes, the place of employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND ENFORCEMENT

These recommendations aim for the effective implementation and enforcement of mechanisms to protect, remedy, and provide access to justice for victims of human trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

9. Create a comprehensive and accessible grievance mechanism for domestic workers in order to address, and protect victims of, human trafficking and forced labour (issues addressed: lack of Access to grievance mechanism).

To prevent all forms of exploitation, it is imperative to have an accessible and effective grievance mechanism. This grievance mechanism should protect all domestic workers regardless of nationality, residence status, or “absconding” charges. The grievance mechanism, to be effective, must be:

- » **Safe.** It must be ensured that domestic workers can raise a grievance without fear of discrimination or punishment, such as detention and deportation or retaliation directly from the employer. Ideally, the grievance mechanism should be staffed by women, preferably with a representative range of nationalities.
- » **Accessible.** The grievance mechanisms must be accessible in practice, including for those that are in remote locations, those who cannot read or write, and those who cannot speak Arabic. This means there should be no complex administrative procedures and it must be accessible through different mediums. Also, proof of identity at this step must not be required as those most vulnerable will not have their passport with them. Creating a ‘women’s desk’ staffed by women in key police stations and at the Ministry of Labour under the grievance mechanism umbrella, would allow more accessibility and trust in the system to bring complaints forward. The grievance mechanism should also be available seven days a week, 24 hours a day, including holidays.
- » **Transparent.** All steps that follow the submission of a grievance must be clearly set out in a way that is easily accessible and understandable for everyone accessing it to understand the process. This helps to create trust, and the domestic worker will know what to expect and when.
- » **Responsive.** All grievances should be responded to immediately and without delay. All grievances and questions should be addressed, investigated and answered promptly.
- » **Independent.** The entity responsible for receiving complaints must be independent of the police and immigration departments. On the other hand, if the police or any other entity receives a complaint from a domestic worker, it should be referred to the grievance mechanism. At this point, the domestic worker should not be detained or returned to her employer.

- » **Fair.** Investigations and remedies must be fair and lead to outcomes that are consistent with the best international standards. All investigations must be impartial.
- » **Socially inclusive.** The grievance mechanism must be accessible to all domestic workers regardless of migration or employment status. It should also consider supporting referrals for legal support and emergency shelters for domestic workers who are at risk (see **Improve access to Shelter**).

10. Improve access to justice for domestic workers, victims of exploitation and abuse to uphold the rule of law (issues address: lack of **Access to justice and accountability efforts, Human trafficking, Forced labour, Working and living conditions and Recruitment offices in Oman).**

Access to justice is a key element for the protection and prevention of human trafficking, forced labour and other forms of exploitation and abuse. To improve access to justice we recommend:

- Removing all barriers that prevent access to justice such as **“absconding” charges**
- Having a working **grievance mechanism** that facilitates access to justice
- Providing legal representation to all domestic workers seeking justice, free of charge
- Strengthening the efficiency of the justice system so the time that cases take does not deter anyone from filing charges
- Ensuring that the domestic worker is allowed to work during the process, or providing shelter and food, whichever the worker prefers
- Ensuring that an enforcement process is in place to ensure compliance with the court’s decisions with no time delays
- Allowing workers to transfer power of attorney to their legal representative in order to give them the option to leave the country while the case is in process.

11. Establish and enforce effective accountability mechanisms for human trafficking, forced labour and other forms of exploitation (issues addressed: lack of **Access to justice and accountability efforts, Human trafficking, Forced labour, Working and living conditions and Recruitment offices in Oman).**

Accountability helps to ensure that no one is above the law, deterring practices that constitute elements of forced labour or other forms of exploitation. We recommend firmly holding recruiting offices, employers and any other entity that facilitates human trafficking or any other form of exploitation or abuse accountable, in particular:

Recruiting offices must be held accountable if and when they:

- Do not implement national regulations
- Recruit domestic workers who were charged recruiting fees or deceived in the origin country
- Lock inside a room, and/or do not provide proper room and board to domestic workers under their responsibility
- Place domestic workers at different homes for temporary work with or without payment

- Threaten domestic workers in any way or form
- Commit any kind of abuse against the domestic worker.

Employers must be held accountable when and if they:

- Do not pay in full and/or on time the domestic worker's salary
- Do not provide a work contract or provide a copy of the work contract to the worker
- Do not comply with regulations regarding working conditions
- Do not comply with regulations regarding living conditions
- Do not provide flight tickets in a timely manner for the worker to return home upon the termination of the work contract.

Any person or entity must be held accountable when and if they:

- Withholds workers' personal documents. All domestic workers should have their documents with them, regardless of immigration or employment status. Ensure retrieval of confiscated passports from employers or recruiting offices and return them to workers
- Requests, receives or facilitates the payment of "release money"
- Uses threats for the purpose of exploitation
- Is a perpetrator of any other kind of abuse, harassment or violence.

12. Build a monitoring system and team, to monitor and enforce regulations related to recruitment and working and living conditions (issues addressed: Human trafficking, Forced labour and Working and living conditions).

To ensure effective implementation and enforcement of all laws protecting domestic workers, a domestic worker monitoring system and team should be created. These should:

» Monitor recruiting offices to identify, prevent, and address exploitative and abusive practices by recruitment offices by:

- Ensuring that all regulatory frameworks are being implemented
- Making non-scheduled visits, speaking to workers housed by recruitment offices, and auditing all relevant documentation, including the office's human rights policy and its implementation system
- Documenting the number of workers that are being returned to recruitment offices to ensure that offices are effectively preventing and addressing human trafficking and other forms of exploitation and;
- Documenting the number of complaints lodged against recruitment offices and identifying "high-risk" recruitment offices for continuous monitoring.

» Monitor households that employ domestic workers:

To protect the privacy of employers, when monitoring households, permission to enter a household must be obtained and the employer can choose to have the visit inside the home or not. In case the visit is not done at the employer's home, the monitoring must still take place. The monitoring team should monitor working conditions by:

- Carrying out confidential interviews with domestic workers and employers, documenting all issues and proactively referring any issues to the relevant authorities
- Ensuring that the domestic workers documents have not been/were not confiscated
- Ensuring that the domestic workers' work contracts are in place, that they are working with valid contracts and that domestic workers have a copy of the contract
- During these visits, the employer must present all the documents required by law, such as the signed work contract, payslips signed by the worker, etc
- Making regular phone/voice calls to domestic workers to check on their working conditions could also support the monitoring activities. Ideally, these calls should be done by women, ideally of the same nationality as the worker.

»» **Monitor living conditions:**

- If a monitoring team can enter a household, monitoring should include the domestic worker's sleeping arrangements, including the bathroom. These arrangements should be in line with the relevant requirements
- If a monitoring team is not allowed to enter a household, the domestic worker and employer must provide a picture or video of the domestic worker's sleeping arrangements.

For the monitoring team to be effective, it must:

- Be implemented together with an effective **grievance mechanism**;
- Be ensured that the monitoring team is skilled and prepared to identify situations of human trafficking, forced labour and other forms of abuse;
- Refer cases of potential human trafficking, forced labour and exploitation to the relevant entity, with findings, to open an investigation;
- Refer cases of non-compliance to the relevant authorities for follow up. Cases with non-compliance must continue to be monitored to ensure enforcement or accountability;
- Keep and record all findings;
- Collect data regularly on the number and type of issues and number of monitoring visits;
- Have mainly women monitoring and conducting the interviews with the domestic workers, ideally in the worker's mother tongue

13. Develop a remediation process to address human trafficking (issues addressed: lack of Access to protection mechanisms).

A remediation process is essential to help address violations that have taken place against domestic workers and provide opportunities for the government to address issues arising from their root causes. Oman, as a signatory to the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (the Palermo Protocol), should ensure remedy. According to the 'Draft basic principles on the right to an effective remedy for victims of trafficking in persons' remedies should include:⁸³

- »» **Restitution.** To restore the victim to their original situation before trafficking or exploitation occurred as best as possible. For those trafficked to Oman, this should include safe and

⁸³ "Draft basic principles on the right to an effective remedy for trafficked" <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Trafficking/Consultation/ConsultationEffectiveRemedy/DraftBasicPrinciples.pdf>. Accessed 16 May. 2022.

voluntary repatriation support and addressing root causes of trafficking to ensure that upon victims return to the pre-existing situation will not put her at risk of being trafficked.

- » **Rehabilitation and recovery.** This should include medical and psychological care, as well as providing an accessible shelter and access to medical services. It should also include information about their legal rights. This support should consider a non-conditional recovery period.
- » **Compensation.** Financial support can help a victim to rebuild their life. This includes, for example, access to compensation from the State for injuries and damages and to remain in the country legally during proceedings.

14. Improve access to the existing shelter, or create a shelter specifically for domestic workers, for victims of human trafficking and/or other forms of abuse to ensure protection and prevent re-exploitation (issues addressed: lack of Access to protection mechanisms and Additional vulnerabilities of victims of human trafficking and forced labour).

A safe and secure shelter for domestic workers, victims of human trafficking and/or other forms of exploitation or abuse, will provide vital assistance for the initial recovery and support needed to begin the process of healing and recovering. We recommend for the existing shelter to implement the following changes or to create a shelter specifically for domestic workers and that considers the following:

- Create a safe, secure, and accessible shelter for all domestic workers victims of any form of exploitation or abuse;
- Information on how to access shelter services and transparency of its services and processes must be available in different forms and media. This information should include functioning mechanisms for referrals to the shelter;
- Ensuring there are no provisions that prevent potential victims from accessing the shelter, including provisions that stipulate that only those that file charges against perpetrators are allowed to stay long term;
- Considering allowing embassies to operate formal shelters to offer support to their nationals;
- Integrating shelter referrals into the **grievance mechanisms**.

15. Increase awareness of issues affecting domestic workers to better implement all regulations and prevent and address all forms of human trafficking, forced labour and other forms of exploitation (issues addressed: Human trafficking and Forced labour).

Awareness is a key element for any policy, regulation or desired practice to be implemented effectively. For all recommendations shared here to be effective, an awareness campaign must also be implemented. As a minimum, we recommend:

- » **Developing a campaign to improve the treatment of domestic workers by employers.**
The campaign should:
 - Be based on a human rights-based approach where the campaign focuses on the prohibition, prevention and elimination of all forms of discrimination prioritising domestic workers, the community most vulnerable and affected to human trafficking

- Include information on:
 - *The rights of domestic workers as an active working group within a working sector;*
 - *The responsibilities of domestic workers - including those tasks that are not to be assigned to a domestic worker;*
 - *Responsibilities of employers toward domestic workers;*
 - *The appropriate professional relationship that should be held between a domestic worker and an employer;*
 - *Monitoring efforts to address forced labour and other forms of exploitation;*
 - *Consequences for any form of neglect of the laws or contract.*
- » **Increase awareness about fair and ethical recruitment practices.** Awareness can be increased through a campaign that includes:
 - Information on the consequences of a domestic worker being deceived;
 - Information on the issues affecting domestic workers when they have paid recruitment fees;
 - Information directed to employers on how to respond if they have recruited a domestic worker who was deceived or charged recruitment fees.
- » **Increase awareness of the prohibition of withholding domestic workers' documents.** This campaign should inform workers, recruitment offices and employers of the strict prohibition of this practice. It should also include information on consequences, accountability, and how to access the grievance mechanism to report such cases.
- » **Increase awareness of the available grievance mechanism for domestic workers by:**
 - Ensuring that all arriving domestic workers receive information about their rights and the grievance mechanism. This can include a mandatory briefing with all arriving domestic workers in the airport, without the presence of recruitment office staff or employers. In these briefings an illustrated and digital guide accessible to those that cannot read should be provided to domestic workers with the relevant information;
 - Creating a public education campaign to raise awareness on how to access the grievance mechanism ensuring that the campaign reaches domestic workers in a format and language that they can access and understand;
 - Requiring recruitment offices to display information (both written and illustrated) about the grievance mechanisms available in multiple languages.
- » **Increase awareness of contract importance.** Develop an awareness campaign focusing on the importance of work contracts to ensure that all employers provide a working contract to domestic workers and that domestic workers know they should keep a copy.
- » **Increase awareness of available shelters for domestic workers.** Raise awareness of the existing shelter among domestic workers. Special attention should be put on how workers can get more information about the shelter and how to access it. Ensure in the awareness-raising process to state that staying in the shelter is voluntary, that the shelter is accessible regardless of charges (e.g. "absconding") or immigration status, which could cause fear and discourage women from seeking support.

6.2 Recommendations to the Government of Sierra Leone

The issues that most Sierra Leonean women in Oman face start in their home country. In early 2019, the government put a ban on Sierra Leoneans from working abroad to prevent exploitation. However, this created illegal and unsafe recruitment channels and higher vulnerability to trafficking. The ban was lifted in April 2021, with the objective of creating access to safe and legal migration.

Sierra Leone has made significant efforts to address human trafficking and protect its nationals from exploitation. It has developed the Labor Migration Policy, the National Migration Policy, the National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Person for the period of 2020 to 2023, the Government's National Medium Term Development Plan (2019-2023) and different institutional reforms such as establishing district task forces for combating human trafficking. In addition, it became a signatory to the ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers, which will come into force in August 2022.

However, through our research, we found considerable important issues that need to be addressed with utmost urgency to prevent the continued trafficking of women to Oman.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN IMPLEMENTATION AND ENFORCEMENT

16. Strengthen regulations on fair and ethical recruitment to ensure conditions that provide decent work.

After lifting the ban in April 2021, the Sierra Leonean Government made efforts to address human trafficking. The Labour Ministry started a vetting process for all recruitment agencies that recruit Sierra Leoneans who want to work abroad. Later in 2021, Labour Officials started to work with SOS Global Investment in Ghana, a job placement company, to take full charge of the departure of Sierra Leonean migrant workers. Following these efforts we recommend further strengthening regulations on fair and ethical recruitment ensuring conditions that provide decent work by:

- Strengthening the implementation and enforcement of the Labour Migration Policy;
- Developing a comprehensive approach to achieve fair recruitment, using the ILO General Principles and Operational Guidelines on Fair Recruitment (ILO GPOG) and the *Montreal Recommendations on Recruitment: A Road Map towards Better Regulation* to regulate the recruitment sector;
- Ensuring that recruitment agencies, whether SOS Global Investment or any other recruitment agency, are regulated, monitored and hold accountable for wrongdoings;
- Ensuring that, as per Convention 189, recruitment agencies provide all workers who will take domestic work overseas with a written job offer or contract of employment (Oman domestic workers contract), where all terms and conditions are stated, before the worker decides to take the employment offer and sign the contract. Special provisions must also be put in place to make sure that those who cannot read are still aware of the contracts' terms and conditions;

- Prohibiting recruitment agencies and / or contracted agencies from charging any recruitment fees,⁸⁴ including processing fees or training fees.⁸⁵

17. Strengthen the implementation of a safe, independent, and accessible national grievance mechanism to report human trafficking, including unlicensed or unethical recruitment agencies and/or irregular brokers.

Currently, the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone has a grievance mechanism in place where individuals can submit complaints online, by telephone (including WhatsApp) or by going directly to their offices. We recommend ensuring that this, or any other form of grievance mechanism follows best practices that include:

- **Safe.** It must be ensured that all Sierra Leoneans can raise a grievance without the fear of retaliation from anyone including Law Enforcement Officers. If a WhatsApp number is available, it should represent the entity by having a relevant profile and timely response.⁸⁶
- **Accessible.** The grievance mechanisms must be accessible in practice, including for those that are in remote locations, marginalised or excluded, including those who can not read or write. It should eliminate complex administrative procedures and it must be accessible through different mediums. The grievance mechanism should be available seven days a week 24 hours a day including holidays. It should also be inclusive and accessible to all in line with President Julius Maada Bio's vision for an inclusive nation.⁸⁷
- **Transparent.** All steps that follow the submission of a grievance must be clear and set out for all to understand. It should also include approximate timelines. This information should be directly on the website in a language that is easy to understand and without having to download or read through the Complaint Rules and Procedures to obtain this information, as is currently the case.⁸⁸ This helps to create transparency and trust in the system.
- **Responsive.** All grievances should be responded to promptly and without delay. If no one is available via phone or WhatsApp, ensure that there is an automatic answer responding accordingly. All questions should be addressed and answered.
- **Independent.** The entity responsible for receiving complaints must be independent of all other entities.
- **Fair.** Investigations and remedies must be fair and lead to outcomes that are consistent with national policies and efforts. All investigations must be impartial.

⁸⁴ "Principle 1 of the Dhaka Principles. "Migrant workers are not charged any fees for recruitment or placement."

⁸⁵ Flyer circulated in 2021 by SOS Labour and the Sierra Leone Ministry of Labour required Processing and Training fees of US\$800

⁸⁶ The WhatsApp number available for the Human Rights Commission has a profile of a couple. Accessed on April 12, 2022.

⁸⁷ "My government is focused and committed to inclusive national development and that means radical inclusion of every citizen regardless of gender, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic status or other circumstance". National Policy on Radical Inclusions in Schools. <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Radical-Inclusion-Policy.pdf> Accessed April 11, 2022

⁸⁸ Human Rights Commission Complaint Procedure website: http://hrc-sl.org/Complaint_Procedures.aspx. Accessed on July 4th, 2022

18. Continue to strengthen efforts for victims of human trafficking to access justice, and investigate, prosecute and convict traffickers, including those that facilitate it.

Access to justice and investigations, prosecutions and convictions of traffickers, including those that facilitate it, is a crucial step to combat human trafficking in the country. We recommend:

- Addressing corruption, bribery and extortion in all relevant departments, especially with the Sierra Leone Police Force, to ensure victims of human trafficking can access justice freely and safely;
- Investigating promptly and holding firmly accountable those who facilitate or were part of any form of corruption within the judicial system or police;
- Avoiding procedural delays, thus increasing efficiency and trust in the judicial system;
- Investigating, prosecuting and convicting recruiting agency owners, recruiters, brokers and/or any entity or individual engaging in unethical, or illegal recruitment such as charging recruitment fees, practising deception, threats or any other kind of abuse for the purpose of recruitment;
- Increasing the penalties for convicted traffickers, so justice is appropriate, meaningful, and guarantees non-repetition;
- Investigating, prosecuting and convicting hospitals, medical facilities and/or clinics for the manipulation of health tests for the purpose of migration;
- Ensuring effective victim protection during investigations and prosecution;
- Continuing to provide victims who need it, with transportation to make sure they do not miss their appointments.

19. Strengthen remedy efforts to address human trafficking.

Remedy is a key element for supporting a victims' recovery, reinstating their rights and preventing re-victimisation. Sierra Leone, as a signatory to the Palermo Protocol, should 'ensure its domestic legal system contains measures that offer victims of trafficking in persons the possibility of obtaining compensation for damage suffered.'⁸⁹ These remedies taken from the 'Draft Basic Principles on the right to an effective remedy for victims of trafficking in persons' developed by the Special Rapporteur should include:⁹⁰

- » **Restitution.** To restore the victim to their original situation before trafficking or exploitation occurred as best as possible. For those trafficked outside of Sierra Leone, this should include reintegration support and addressing root causes of trafficking to ensure that upon victims return to the pre-existing situation will not put her at risk of being trafficked.
- » **Rehabilitation and recovery.** This should include medical and psychological care, as well as providing an accessible shelter and access to medical services. It should also include information about their legal rights and how to access justice. This support should consider a non-conditional recovery period.

⁸⁹ Article 6(6) of UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Palermo Protocol)

⁹⁰ "Draft basic principles on the right to an effective remedy for trafficked" <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Trafficking/Consultation/ConsultationEffectiveRemedy/DraftBasicPrinciples.pdf>. Accessed 16 May. 2022

- » **Compensation.** Financial support can help a victim to rebuild their life. This includes, for example, access to compensation from the State for injuries and damages and mechanisms created for victims of human trafficking to recoup any fees paid to recruiters/brokers/traffickers.

20. Increase awareness to prevent human trafficking.

Increasing awareness on human trafficking is the first step for an effective anti-trafficking strategy. We recommend:

- » Creating a public awareness campaign to improve awareness of safe migration practices in line with Convention 189 and the Dhaka Principles. The campaign should include information on:
 - What is ethical recruitment and what is not
 - The prohibition of recruitment fees
 - How to identify red flags for deception/human trafficking
 - How to access a hotline and report any issues
- » The campaign should ensure it targets vulnerable populations, especially women who are:
 - Between the ages of 22 and 40 years old (see **Demographics, reasons for migrating and migration routes**)
 - Breadwinners, especially those who lack family support (e.g. single mothers, orphans, parents with disabilities, etc.) (see **Reasons for migrating**)
 - Living in poverty
 - In the rural areas (see **Who is the recruiter?**)
- » Requiring an educational session for migrating Sierra Leoneans to prepare them with reliable and accurate information on employment and life in the Gulf Countries. This should include an explanation of proper recruitment practices, signs of potential human trafficking, labour and sexual exploitation, and information on available grievance mechanisms in relevant countries in case when and if support is needed.

21. Continue strengthening collaboration with Guinea to prevent smuggling and human trafficking between countries.

Guinea being identified as the main country from which Sierra Leoneans travelled to Oman, it is important to strengthen enforcement and monitoring mechanisms to prevent smuggling and human trafficking between countries. We recommend:

- Continuing to strengthen monitoring of porous border points, and develop relevant processes to prevent Sierra Leoneans being smuggled through these points, including by addressing corruption and bribery;
- Continuing to increase border control at relevant entry points;
- Addressing gaps in policies, implementation and enforcement, to disrupt smuggling and trafficking networks.

6.3 Recommendations to the Governments of Oman and Sierra Leone

Collaboration by both countries is vital for the effective prevention of human trafficking of Sierra Leoneans to Oman. This collaboration should, among other things, help to better regulate and monitor recruitment and protect the rights of domestic workers.

It is our understanding that a bilateral agreement between both countries related to migrant workers is in process and that Oman has drafted an agreement that is currently being reviewed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security in Sierra Leone.⁹¹ This agreement should set the basic standards of cooperation to help better protect Sierra Leonean women domestic workers from human trafficking and forced labour. In addition to this agreement, we recommend:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLABORATION AND TO ADDRESS THE CURRENT CHALLENGES

22. Creating an effective and transparent collaborative relationship to protect domestic workers.

This should include:

- A bilateral agreement, such as the one in process, that specifically protects domestic workers from Sierra Leone in Oman. The level of protection should not be relevant to the power of the origin or destination country. This agreement, if possible, should include collaboration with transit countries such as Guinea and Senegal;
- Development of a mutually acceptable recruitment and monitoring system designed to prevent and address human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. This system should ensure that the recruitment of domestic workers from Sierra Leone to Oman is processed only through fair and ethical recruitment agencies that are duly licenced and monitored by their respective countries;
- Development of an automatic, or without delay, reporting process to the Embassy of Sierra Leone in Saudi Arabia of arrests of Sierra Leonean nationals by the Oman Ministry of Labour and Royal Oman Police. This will expedite repatriations and deportations;⁹²
- Presence of a labour attaché or a representative of the Sierra Leonean Government in Oman.

23. Make priority to address the current situation of Sierra Leoneans domestic workers in Oman who want to return home but are unable to.

There is an extremely high number of Sierra Leoneans in Oman who are victims of human trafficking and/or exploitation and who want to return home but are unable to. The main reason for not being able to return is the presence of “absconding” charges and/or because their employers are

⁹¹ As of the end of May, 2022.

⁹² Per Article 36, Paragraph B of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations 1963, which Oman has accessed.

asking for “release money” to be allowed to return home. (Note: There are many others who wish to stay in Oman and work under better conditions or in another sector. To address the needs of these workers, see **Recommendation 3.**) To address this situation we recommend the following:

- For those who have left their employers:
 - For Oman to put in place an amnesty to allow all Sierra Leoneans to return to their country of origin regardless of “absconding” charges, visas status or immigration fines;
- For those who are still with their employers:
 - For Oman to conduct a human trafficking and/or forced labour screening, following a similar approach used for this report, with all Sierra Leonean domestic workers in the country and offer repatriation support to any victims who wish to return;
- For Oman and Sierra Leone to reach an agreement by which Oman can provide exit passes to all Sierra Leoneans to exit Oman without having to negotiate with the employer for the return of their passport nor having to request an Emergency Travel Certificate from the Sierra Leone Embassy in Riyadh;
- For Oman and Sierra Leone to engage with relevant stakeholders (including the potential of working with international organisations) that can support the safe and voluntary repatriation of these women, including the coverage of flight tickets and other travel expenses;
- For Sierra Leone to waive all health declaration fees for Sierra Leoneans returning from Oman under this amnesty or those receiving repatriation support.

In addition to these recommendations, we would also highly recommend for Oman to investigate the absconding reasons, identify victims of trafficking and/or exploitation, and recuperate wages on behalf of these women – as long as it does not significantly delay their repatriation. We would also highly recommend for Sierra Leone to open investigations to identify the recruiters of these victims of human trafficking and prosecute and convict accordingly. We also recommend they provide reintegration support to this group of women.

7. CONCLUSION

An ongoing difficult economic situation in Sierra Leone is driving women to look for better life opportunities in the Gulf countries. Traffickers target these women, creating a thriving and growing business. In Oman, the women's legal status is assigned to an individual, creating unrestrained and unchecked power over the worker. Elements of the kafala system (sponsorship system) keep the women in forced labour, and systemic gaps in legislation and enforcement of existing procedures prevent women from accessing remedy mechanisms and justice. In addition, a repressed civic space in Oman obstructs women from receiving any form of support.

The objective of this report is to identify the root causes of the human rights abuses experienced by Sierra Leonean women domestic workers in Oman, expose our findings, and put forward recommendations to bring about meaningful change. As this report demonstrates, current efforts to understand, prevent and address human trafficking and forced labour are not enough. After 22 months of thorough research, investigation, collection of RT & NRT data and analysis, and detailed conversations coupled with our on-the-ground knowledge, our findings reveal that:

- » **There is substantial and compelling evidence that human trafficking, labour exploitation and a distressing array of human rights violations experienced by Sierra Leoneans in Oman are widespread, systemic, and, to an extent, normalised;**
- » **Efforts to prevent human trafficking and labour exploitation of Sierra Leoneans in Oman are vital for a just and equal society, but are, to a great extent, absent;**
- » **Efforts to address human trafficking and labour exploitation and other forms of abuse experienced by domestic workers in Oman are insufficient and ineffective in both Sierra Leone and Oman.**

These conclusions reflect an urgent need for action. Our findings identify a significant and largely overlooked issue that requires an immediate response. This report calls for a system change from one where domestic workers do not have equal status as other workers in other sectors, and whose rights and human dignity are not protected or respected, to a system that allows domestic workers to earn a decent living with dignity and access to opportunities to thrive. Understanding that a system change will require significant efforts, we have put forward a set of recommendations that are critical to achieving this. These recommendations provide a blueprint to better prevent and address human trafficking, forced labour and other forms of abuse experienced by domestic workers in Oman from in Sierra Leone. Besides reporting on detailed findings and putting forward these recommendations, we also welcome collaborations with both governments and we look forward to supporting the governments of Oman and Sierra Leone in providing further insights or support for implementing these recommendations.

As domestic workers continue to endure labour exploitation and other forms of abuse in Oman with little or no protection or support, Sierra Leoneans continue to be trafficked to the Gulf country. Our findings have put forward evidence of a much larger problem, too big not to be prioritised.



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