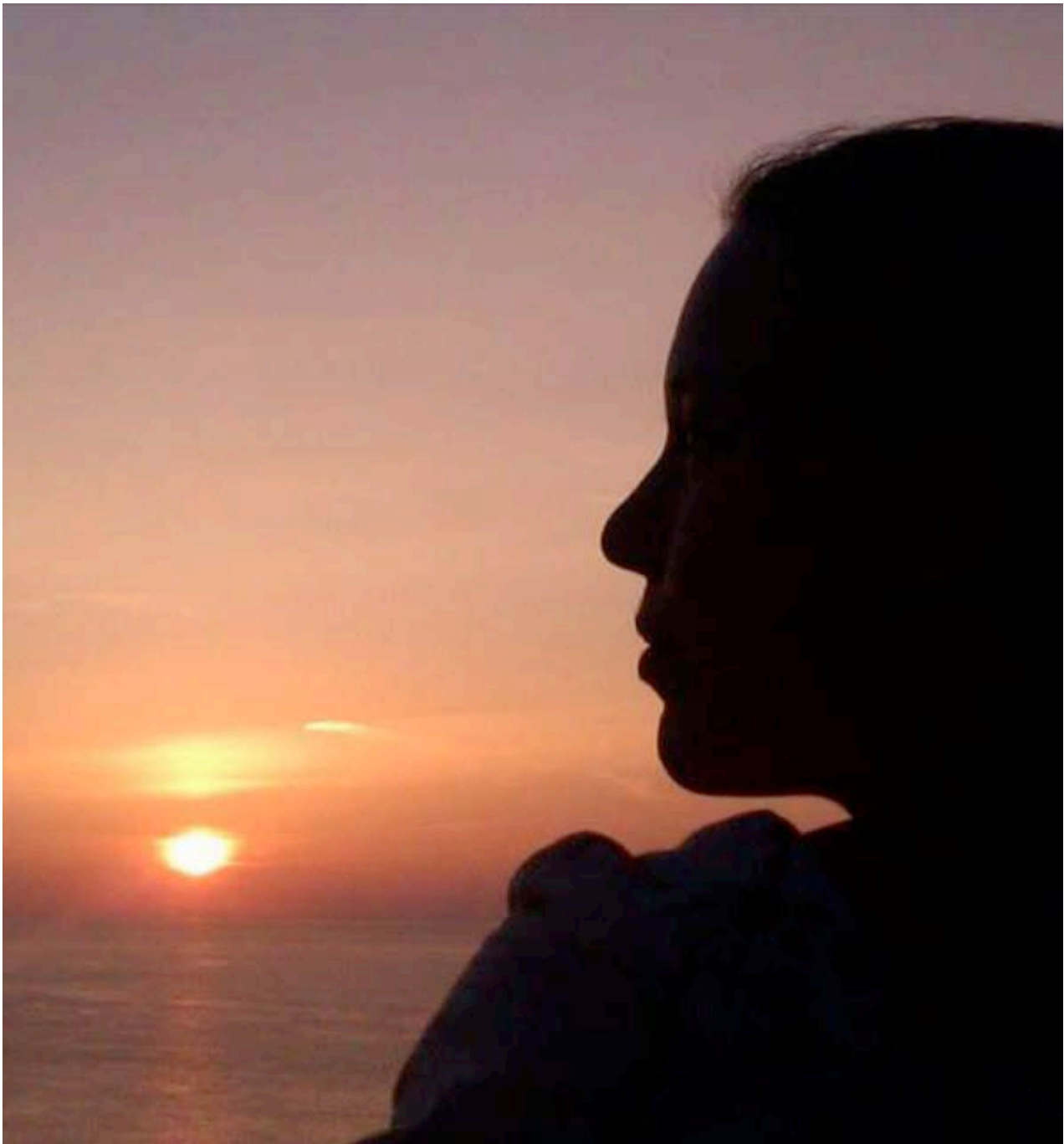


# Owning Our Words

CREATIVE VOICES OF SURVIVOR ALLIANCE MEMBERS  
IN HONOUR OF ANTI-SLAVERY DAY  
18TH OCTOBER 2020





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Creative Voices of Survivor Alliance Members

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18th October 2020

Owning Our Words  
A publication of Survivor Alliance  
<https://www.survivoralliance.org/>

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Designed by Lee Garland  
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## We Are More Than Our Past

The idea for *Owning Our Words* emerged in the middle of 2020 when we were discussing how to commemorate Anti-Slavery Day this year. A suggestion was made that as survivors, we should find a way to portray our abilities, capacities, talents, skills, and knowledge. This is because above all, we want the world to understand that we are much more than our sad stories, we are much more than our past, we are much more than a tool in the hands of another human being, we are much more than paperwork in the hands of the Home Office, we are much more than statistics in the hands of politicians to use for their arguments. And we have so much more to say about what we can do and give back to our communities. A publication seemed the perfect way to convey this to the world.

Being a survivor means you've gone through much more than what life usually throws at people. Before being survivors we were people who had plans and dreams for the future and who even had professions. Then we found ourselves on the journey of being trafficked.

We survived trafficking. But many of us now find ourselves in the hands of the UK government. Within this system, we are not able to express or to celebrate our freedom after exiting slavery either. Rather, we find ourselves within another form of slavery, in which we are not allowed to work, nor to pursue further education which would help us to revive the dreams and plans we had for the future. According to the Home Office, 'being identified as a victim of human trafficking and modern slavery does not automatically give you status'. Now we find ourselves being re-exploited, rendered destitute and so much more.

In spite of these difficulties, survivors are still thriving members of society. We have the resilience to stand strong because we believe those experiences have helped us to keep fighting for justice in this hostile environment in which we live. This publication has enabled us to display some of those skills. It has also presented us with a platform to amplify our voices. And it has emerged as a space in which our stories are respected and survivors are treated with dignity and love. Thank you to Survivor Alliance and to Anna Ball who collaborated with us on this publication for their support in this work.

We hope that other survivors out there who are still battling their way out of slavery will also find strength in our words. As you'll hear from our voices: don't give up, keep fighting. We as survivors are here to support you – to be both a friend and a family to you.

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## Warriors, Listeners, Survivors

Utthan means 'uprising', a movement to rise and transcend. Utthan Survivors Group is mentored by an ally organisation called Sanjog, a technical resource organisation that seeks to counteract gender-based violence, sexual violence, and the trafficking of women and children. Utthan is affiliated as a member organisation to the International Survivor Alliance and is based in Kolkata, but works nationally in partnership with several survivor leaders' collectives in India. The group was started by twenty young women survivors who had all been victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation when they were teenagers. While they had escaped that bazaar of sexual violence against girls, many Utthan leaders then had to face imprisonment in shelter homes and even when they finally returned back home, they were left to fend for themselves against the shame and stigma of having become 'dirty', to live with the emotional and physical scars of sexual exploitation and the fear of rejection and homelessness. They have effectively been orphaned - not only by their families and communities, but by their governments as well. Against this backdrop, the women decided to come together in order to rebuild their lives, while fighting trafficking and preventing slavery-based practices in India. Central to this work has been the ethos of speaking for oneself and pushing survivors' narratives to the forefront of international attention.

Today Utthan's appeal to all Indian and international citizens, political parties, aspiring Prime Ministers and political leaders is to recognize, speak up and curb the sexual violence and human trafficking that has spilled everywhere beyond designated red-light areas – into homes and streets, into schools and playgrounds, into real life and onto our cellphones and computers. Utthan seeks to reveal how human trafficking and slavery do not only manifest in the form of forced prostitution, but also in the form of bonded labour for those who must work in settings such as brick kilns, construction work, factories and sweatshops. It even emerges in the homes of the wealthy as a means to provide cheap and exploitative labour.

As a mentor to the group, I have found these young women and girls of Utthan to be kind listeners to others, passionate warriors committed to breaking taboos, supportive cheerleaders to other survivors, angry protestors in conversations with NGOs, government officials and stakeholders who are dismissive towards survivors, and fierce friends who have each other's backs through the hard times. And that is truly what inspires me to remain an ally, a teacher, a learner, and an inseparable part of Utthan.

*Uma Chatterjee  
Founder Director Sanjog India  
An ally of Utthan*

[www.sanjogindia.org/programmes/utthan/](http://www.sanjogindia.org/programmes/utthan/)

# A Note on the Publication

The American professor Brené Brown has written that ‘owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do’. When Survivor Alliance approached me to help them produce a publication in honour of Anti-Slavery Day 2020, it struck me as fundamental to foreground this ethos of ownership in our collaboration – for while survivors of human trafficking and modern-day slavery have experienced profound violations of self-ownership, sometimes financial, sometimes embodied, they nevertheless retain the capacity to determine how they speak about themselves, and thus how others come to read of their lives, stories and existences. In my work as both an academic in literary studies and as a cultural activist allied to those experiencing forced migration or currently navigating the asylum system, I have found that placing ownership of language back in the hands of the people who are being written about, and creating spaces for their voices to be heard, is a deeply empowering experience – and this, above all, is what Survivor Alliance seeks for its members. Owing Our Words, then, is an opportunity for Survivor Alliance members to speak of themselves on their own terms – without having to perform the role of ‘victim’ or ‘survivor’ if they do not wish to do so, without having to adhere to an official narrative, and with the freedom to explore the positive qualities and attributes within themselves that are so frequently silenced by the experiences of trafficking and slavery.

But creating this space of free speech has been particularly challenging within the context of a 2020 lived under the restrictions of a global pandemic. While the process of producing a publication such as this would usually emerge through in-person, collaborative workshops in which trust can be built and an ethos of sharing established, social distancing demanded that we shift our practices online. Nevertheless, the determination and commitment of Survivor Alliance members carried us through this process. We worked from a series of discussion prompts initially developed through a workbook distributed in advance of the online workshops. Within the workshops themselves, we focussed on verbal contribution and conversation, from which I later produced transcripts that were returned to the contributors for further editing and development. The work that emerged was sometimes therefore collective, and sometimes more individualised. In the case of the Utthan Survivor Group workshops, this experience was mediated through translation: my thanks to Uma Chatterjee for her outstanding translation work within and beyond these workshops. SA participants also sometimes chose to submit written work independently of these exercises. In my editing of this work, I deem it important to preserve as much as possible for the original language, style and inflection of the individual’s expressive style – for while this may deviate from ‘standard English’ in places, the unique inflections that are found in the survivors’ voices speak in richer ways of their identities, journeys and personalities. It is through their voices that we sense who they are, as they choose to speak of themselves.

The (self-selected) contributors to this publication all demonstrated immense talent, commitment and creativity. It has been at once joyous and humbling to work with them. Thank you to Survivors Alliance for this wonderful opportunity to work with you, and in particular, to Sister J for the initial invitation, and to Nancy for all of her marvellous organisational work. Thank you, too, to Lee Garland for his wonderful design work on this publication.

It is our collective hope that as you read through these pages, you will hear the voices of Survivor Alliance members shining through – and that you will come to share their fierce determination to protect their, and others’, freedoms.

*Anna Ball*

*Associate Professor in Postcolonial Feminist Studies, Nottingham Trent University*

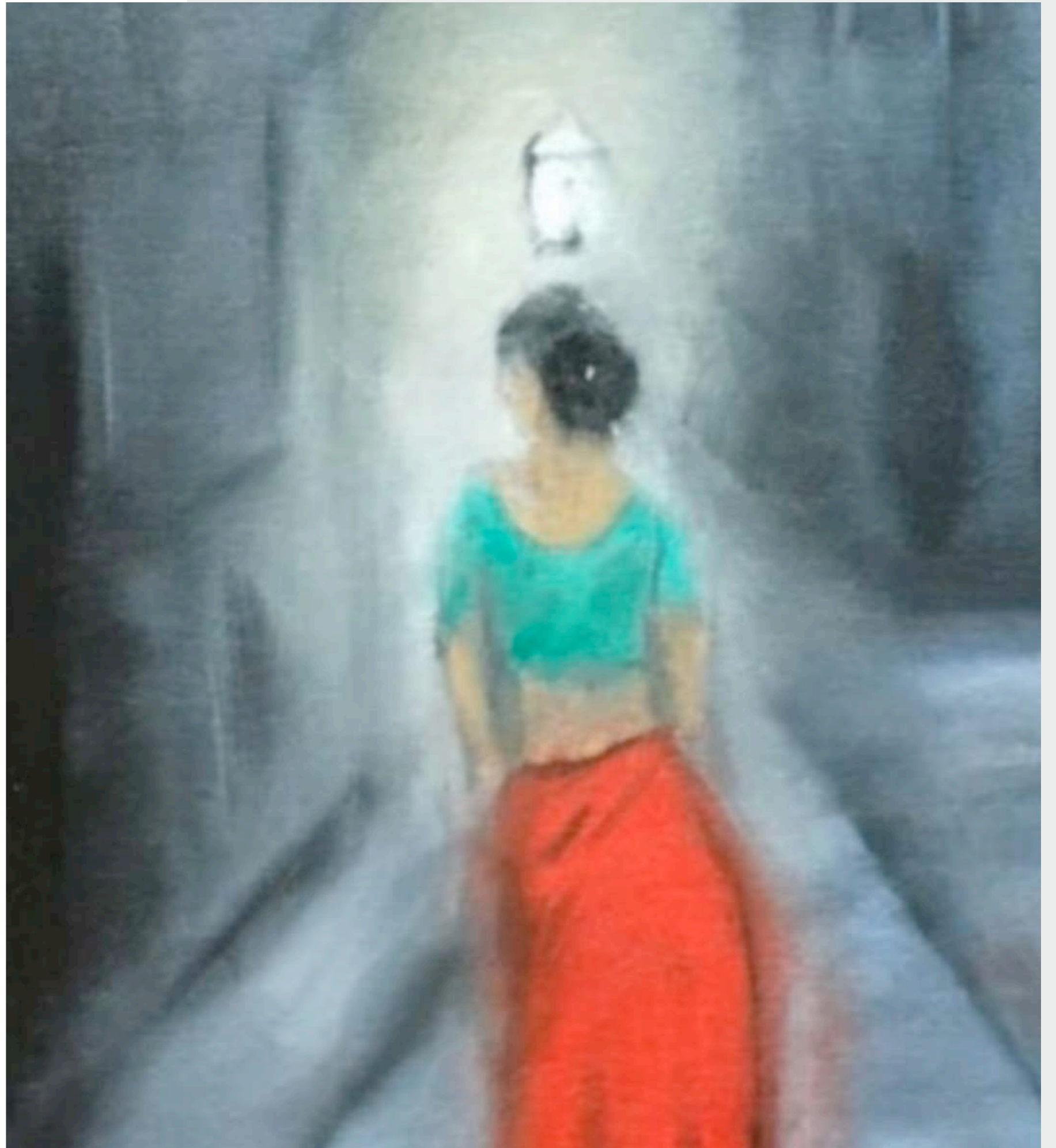
*anna.ball@ntu.ac.uk*



# Self-Portraits

Who are members of Survivor Alliance? At one level, they are people who have survived human trafficking and modern-day slavery – but this is only part of the story. They are also individuals with thoughts, dreams, passions, fears that reach far beyond these experiences. As one group member notes, though, ‘there are many people who talk and write about us and what we need but we do not often have the chance to represent ourselves in our own voice’. In these poems, survivors do just that: paint portraits of themselves in their own words. In doing so, they allow us a glimpse of who they really are – beyond their identity simply as ‘survivor’. Maybe if you look carefully, you will find a reflection of yourself in some of these poems, too.

*Painting by Survivor Alliance member Alicia*



# My Name Is

Moumita. I am a curious bird – I want to know more  
about the world and to fly to many places.

Nasima. All my life, I have felt I am brave and fearless.  
But brave and fearless as I am, I am not yet fulfilled.  
What is this feeling inside?  
I think it is that I have not yet achieved what I really desire.

Simran. I am a dolphin –  
with my joy of life, I draw others to me.  
It is my playfulness that mesmerises and fascinates them so.  
What people will give to see me dance!  
This is my inner spirit.

Aparajita. I am a flowering plant,  
always striving to grow upwards.  
There are days when I grow fearlessly, nourished by the  
sunshine and the rain – and there are others  
when I shrivel a little, wondering  
if I have enough nourishment to survive.  
But I am not easy to kill –  
I am resilient, and in the morning, I will sprout upwards  
once again.

Lilufa. I am the colour yellow.  
It is the colour of optimism and hope –  
it gives joy, and like the sun, it bears responsibility for life.  
You cannot ignore me.  
When I feel dead inside, I imagine drinking it down and  
my organs springing back to life.  
I want to be a drop of this colour in others' lives.

Firoja. I am freedom. At last, I know what it means to be free  
and so the purpose of my life is to live freely and  
to help others know what this means –  
to live freely, to think freely and to speak freely -

And until the day I die,  
my name will be known as that of a leader –  
of someone who fought against slavery, and against trafficking.

*Utthan Survivors Group*

# Breathing

Others might think me rude, because I do not smile easily -  
But when they get to know me, they see that I'm cool.  
For me, it is a joy just to breathe –  
To enjoy the fresh air, with my family around me.  
My name?  
Resilience. This  
Is my past and my future.

*Resilience*





## My Name Remains



My name is Blessing:  
This can be known by anyone.  
The characteristics inside of me are triumph and never giving up.  
'Touch not' is written on my forehead spiritually.

I stand categorically as Blessing.  
And I am standing for the truth.  
I hate lies with a passion.  
I hate those who take advantage of the less privileged.  
I hate those who add pain  
To the pain of the victims or survivors in the land.

Regardless of the pain, trauma and abuse that I have gone through  
I am very proud of myself  
Because the grace of God has helped me thus far  
And makes me a very happy woman in life.

The gift that will help me to live happily forever  
Is freedom from the authority of this country  
And good health which proceeds from the throne of the Almighty God  
And my saviour Jesus Christ.

With God Almighty by my side I have nothing to worry about.

The animal inside of me is a lion: the king of the jungle.

Because God has not given me the spirit of fear but of power, and of love and of a sound mind,  
I fear nothing - not even death.

It will be my pleasure to die at my old age not in the hands of my traffickers.  
My name remains Blessing.

*Blessing*

## People Say

I am a good man – kind and polite, strong in mind  
But soft in heart.  
I don't know about these things.  
But I try to be them.

I am like a cow, every part of me dedicated  
And useful –  
For milk, cheese, meat, even dung.  
Trustworthy.

I need a Visa. But I have no need to be a millionaire –  
Just a family, a constant life.

I like straightforward answers.  
I fear deportation, hate fake hopes.

I am called Si – Syed. I am proud of my name –  
I have no need to pretend it is anything otherwise,  
For I never did a bad thing to anyone in my life.

*Syed*

## Explorer

Is the name I give myself  
Though my friends and family call me  
'Panchita' –  
As though I am innocent,  
To be looked after.  
Others call me brave, strong, funny.  
I didn't realise until they told me.  
I like to be strong  
But sometimes I don't want to be...

I need the sea, trees, leaves –  
And perseverance.  
I love the smallness of our existence.  
I hate abuse.  
My greatest fear is to lose control...  
Even when I know  
I can't control most things.

I dream of living in a world where  
We share the planet and  
Respect all souls within it.

*Explorer*

# Ancestral Pride

People call me Munyindu, thinker, complicated.

I am proud to be called Munyindu.  
This is because my parents taught me that I am Munyindu and not pygmy.

My name is MUSOMBWA IGUNZI Michel, but I never call myself MUSOMBWA!  
I just take it as it is stated in my official identity card;  
I plan to take legal steps to change that name as soon as possible!  
Others call me Michel NDAHASHUBA, and so I call myself.

I offends me that members of a neighboring tribe  
Describe me and my people as complicated,  
Just because we are an indigenous tribe and  
We do not agree to be assimilated to neighboring tribes' cultural identity.  
They came and joined my tribal community members on our native soil;  
My ancestors welcomed them.

Why would they want me to assume the identity of their tribe?  
Isn't it enough to have welcomed them onto our ancestral lands?

I am indigenous, human, natural.  
I am proud to be an indigenous.  
It's only human to be proud of what is naturally within you.

I need dignity, hope in the future and justice.  
I love having company with siblings and friends.  
I fear only fear itself.

The word on my forehead is Peace!  
I dream of living in a world  
Where nobody is able to take another person's life or property.

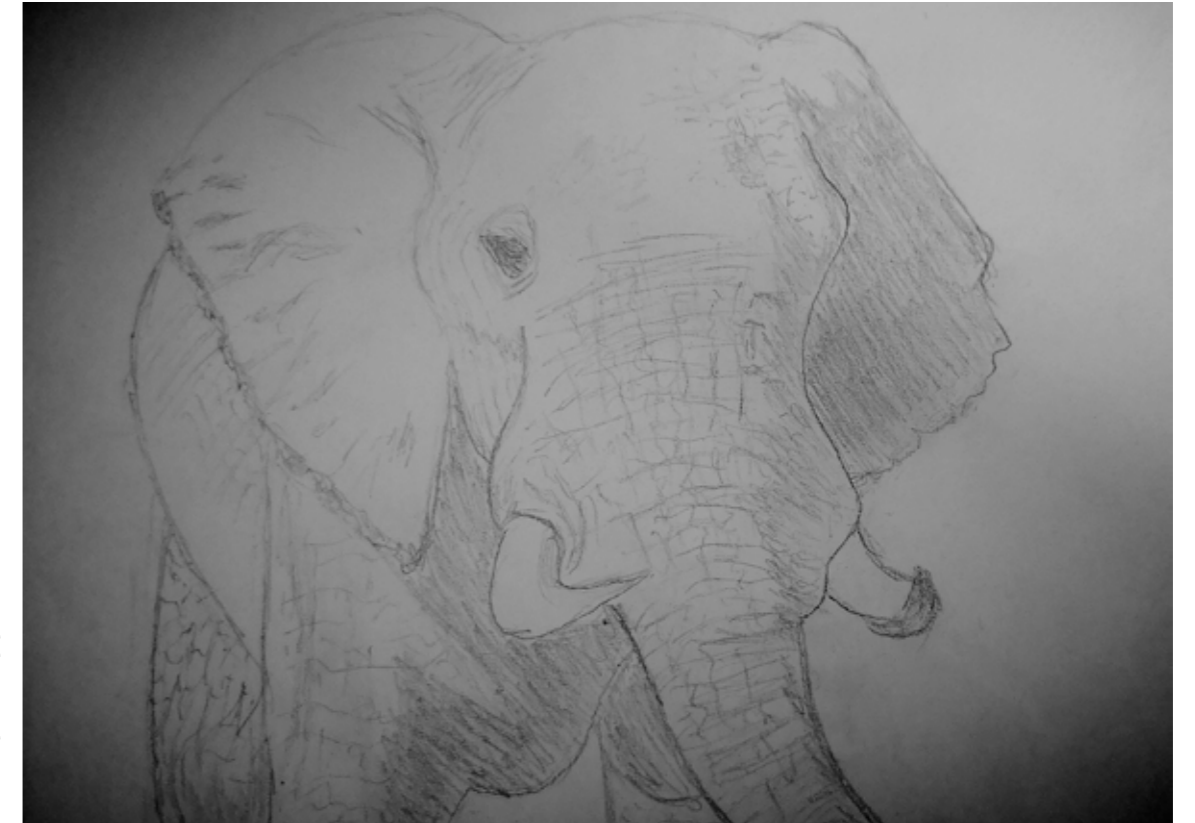
*Eagle*

## Blessing

*Michel Ndashuba*

Grace has seen me through the journey of my life  
And that is what my name means: Nancy.  
People tell me I'm funny, smiley, a good communicator.  
I am confident, have a big heart, am determined.  
But I need wisdom, the Holy Spirit: what it is that tells us what is right.  
I need to know God's plan and purpose for my life.  
'Child of God' is written on my forehead.  
I dream that I will have enough within me to help others to live life, to be happy.  
To be a blessing for them.

*Nancy Esiovwa*



*Pencil drawing by Bee D*

## Elephant

In Thailand,  
Elephants are often mistreated –  
Tied to trees, so that they don't know the strength they have inside them.  
But once they are untied, there's no stopping them.  
There is an elephant inside me.

My name is Sima, from Sanskrit – but I also go by Alicia.  
My family and friends called me Sima,  
But my parents feared mispronunciation, racism – so gave me another name, too.  
Others describe me as determined, a go-getter, independent.

I'm ambitious, loving and loyal.  
I hate injustice and inequality.  
I dream of doing the things I never thought I'd be able to do –  
A PhD, having a family.

I don't need a lot in life –  
Just health and happiness,  
Justice and opportunity for all.

*Alicia*



# Fingerprint

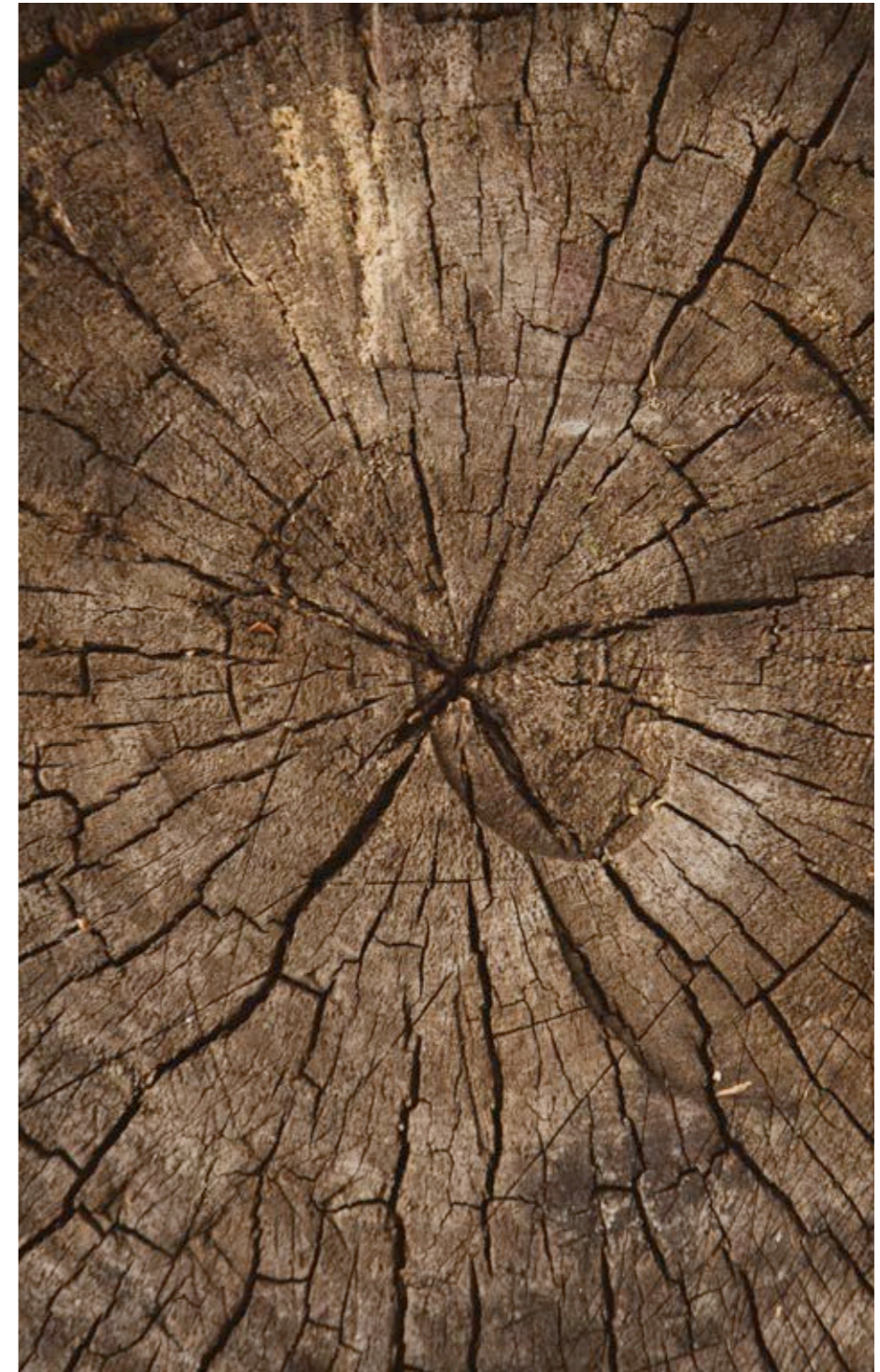
You don't know me  
And yet you already have names for me.  
You see some girl in a charity magazine  
Chained in fear and pity.  
You don't know me  
But you write about me  
as if I'm a specimen to be studied.

You don't know me  
But you seal me in acts and policies  
That are just for no-one  
And only exist in pages, like I do.  
I am folded in your books and cried over by  
Documentary presenters  
Who can't imagine being such a  
Poor, poor thing.

I'm not a thing.  
I'm not a subject of academic interest  
I'm not an advert for your charity  
I don't exist to make you feel generous.  
I don't exist to make you feel fortunate.  
I'm not a political issue to be debated by someone who fights for or against me,  
You don't know me.

I'm a person.  
I am more than what they did to me.  
They do not define me.  
I am a student, a worker, a woman, a friend, an artist, an advocate, a campaigner.  
I am bitter and hopeful, angry and forgiving,  
Mistrustful and loyal.  
I am layered like the trunk of a tree.  
Each year I grow a new skin, my bark  
As unique as a fingerprint.

*Bee D*





## Dreams, Reflections

When survivors are asked to speak by the media and other external agencies, they are often asked to reflect on the difficulties that they have faced, and on the negativities surrounding their lives. Within these writing exercises, though, we sought to flip that narrative and to invite survivors to reflect not on the past, but on the future – on their dreams, desires and aspirations. The work in this section also offers broader reflections on the many qualities and attributes that make us who we are. In places, survivors have chosen to tell versions of their stories in their own terms, as a means to reclaim their narrative – while elsewhere, you will hear reflections on other aspects of existence – such as time, and the purpose of life itself. These are rich inner worlds that may not ‘fit’ the stories we usually hear of survivors – but they testify to all that makes them human.

*Painting by Alicia*

# Loving, Dreaming

I love

My motherland, the world in which I live –  
with all of its diversity, all it has to offer.

My family – all those people who have walked with me  
and who have stood in solidarity with me.

Utthan – it is priceless.

Myself – the person I am, with all of my strengths,  
and my vulnerabilities.

Living with people I love – my family, my children, my friends.

My daughter. Loving is easy, but she is my purpose to live

and

All of this life: its tears, its heartbreaks, its joys, its reasons  
for living.

I dream

Of many colourful things. Like being independent –  
being who I am, being able to stand on my own two feet.

Of my daughter's life being very different from my own –  
free from oppression and slavery.

I dream she gets the education that she needs.

Of financial independence – for me, and  
for all of the women here.

Of working as someone who is able to take care of herself, and  
of the needs of other marginalised people.

Of leaving a legacy. When people speak  
of women who have fought for freedom, they will speak of me.

Of a world of equality between men and women.

Of concepts I have fought for - victim empowerment,  
effective rehabilitation, financial empowerment,  
living without fear – becoming reality.

Of these words being read in many languages,  
so that people will learn that there is a world in which they  
can be exploited, so that their dreams will not be destroyed,  
as mine were

And

That through these small battles the larger war will be won, and  
that India will one day treat its survivors with dignity  
and respect, with a comprehensive anti-trafficking law –

One that gives its survivors the strength to stand up  
and speak out.

*Utthan Survivors Group*



# My Mother, My Reflection

My mother once told me that  
It's how God created the world -  
For girls to grow into women  
And carry the weight of the world around  
Locking them inside themselves.

I tried her shoes and walked around in them.  
They fitted me perfectly.  
Everyone who knew her wondered how at a young age I manage  
But I replied because  
My mother, my reflection.

She carried all the problems on her shoulders  
And she never once complained.  
Even in the last days of her life  
She swore never to put them down.  
She believed it to be what makes a strong woman -  
My mother, my reflection

Many tried her shoes but they were too painful.  
They never got to wear them for a distance.  
All they did was to try them and take them off immediately  
For they were scared to walk a mile in them -  
My mother, my reflection.

Having to carry the world around alone is not an easy task.  
Even today, I have never met a woman like my mom.  
The light that her heart shed was so unique,  
Her heart was as pure as snow,  
But she was as strong as an ox.  
Not easy to break her -  
My mother, my reflection.

Looking at myself I see a woman like her,  
A woman who carried the world for ages.  
Tired she never got,  
A benevolent smile she had -  
My mother, my reflection.

Around me there was no one to carry my weight.  
I walked until I forgot where I was headed,  
Talked to myself on this lonely journey  
With no one willing to try my shoes.  
Because I am a woman, I acted like a horse  
For circumstances taught me that  
My mother, my reflection.

Underneath her exquisite face  
Lay a tormented and broken heart  
Yet caring, kind and generous.  
As heavy as it feels,  
It is never heavy to give -  
My mother, my reflection.

Without her I grew,  
I fended for myself to survive,  
I unlearned what I learnt -  
That a woman carries weights of the world around.  
Love and trust I learnt,  
Forgiveness and apologies I accepted -  
My mother, my reflection.

Courageous I became,  
Awareness and power began to grow within me,  
Justice I fought and peace I made,  
My past I dusted,  
Freedom I seek,  
Love, peace and happiness -  
My mother, my reflection.

*KJ*



# A Fight to Save My Soul

I often wonder, who am I?

A voice inside says, I am that girl. Who one day lost her will to live, lost many dreams, lost many hopes. And gained lots of blame and shame.  
A life of fights, battles and struggles then started – in courtrooms, panchayat and welfare offices, in families and community spaces. I hadn't really thought this would be the story of my life, but that's how my life has become – a fight to save my soul.  
Sometimes I wonder why the people responsible for this injustice and exploitation are free and fearless.

I desire justice - though it has brought me lots of threats and blame, and sometimes even dilemmas. And I have heard and now learnt that silence is not a friend of justice. So if I desire justice, and if I want to live with dignity, I will need to speak up.

I have also kept dealing with the question, where does a survivor find her home? Does she ever find one? I did get temporary shelter in my family house after my traumatic experience, but that was it. My desires, my dreams for my life and my needs didn't find a place in that house. I felt suffocated and stuck at home.

A few years back, I seemed to have crossed that milestone. To achieve my dreams and desires, I left the family house. I left to live on my own, set up my own home, educated myself until High School – where I was forced to drop out as I couldn't access any more resources.

I work as a nurse today. It is hard work I do, I earn very little, but the fight is to find my place in my family and community. It may be small work, small earnings but it will lead to big development, I believe.

Today I encourage others to be compassionate, to be of service to others, to advocate for the many still silenced and marginalized. When I started building myself, little by little, I found the lost parts of myself. I learned that money is very powerful at times as a means to feel safer and to stand stronger.

I have learned not to take ownership of any blame or shame that accusers throw my way. Forgiving perpetrators or accusers is not easy for me...but I know that maybe someday when someone says sorry, they will mean it. And by then, maybe I shall learn to forgive.

*Moumita*

# Time

Time waits for no one, man or woman.  
It keeps to its path no matter what or who stands in its way.  
It is the commodity that is always precious (more so as you get older).  
You are always chasing it; it does not take your personality into account.  
It does not take anything into account.  
It just keeps rolling on.

I felt that I was in limbo and it made me feel that I was able just to exist but not to live.  
They valued their time but they did not care about my time.  
Time is important to all humans and time is experience.  
They were able to experience their time; my time went to waste.  
I experienced fear, no hope, no love.  
When they saw light at the end of the tunnel, I saw darkness.  
My clock was wasted by their egotism, lack of understanding and lack of love.

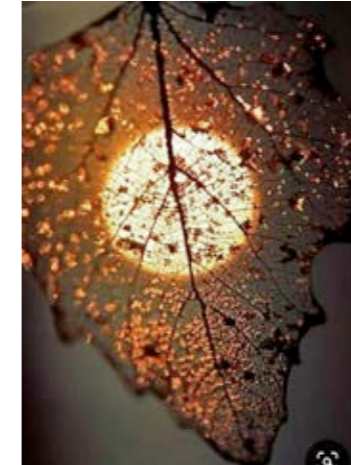
The policy makers must consider time.  
Please consider me or rather consider “us” and please understand the meaning of six months.  
They promised six months waiting time.  
Six months turned to years and then to decades.  
I had no control over anything – not even my own self.  
Now looking back at thoughts wasted and mental anguish,  
I am left to wonder if anyone understands  
that life is lived in time and time wasted is life wasted.  
Save time, save life and save money.

*Annie Wambui Wamwere*

# Life

In every pain there is a purpose,  
In every purpose you will have to go through struggles,  
Nothing comes easy in life.  
Life is a puzzle that we'll keep trying to fix until we leave this world.  
This world is not our home, we all are just in transit.  
Transit is never a permanent place you can stay forever.  
Forever we should be eternally grateful for Life, to the one who gives it.  
GOD.  
Life is priceless; we can't get it at the shop.  
It's a gift given to us by God;  
Don't let us think it is our brilliant idea.  
Let's be thankful to God for the Breath of Life!

*Nancy Esiovwa*



# A Story of Hope

My biggest loss in life has been my freedom. This loss is intricately linked to my trafficking experience. The fear of the world getting to know of this and the fear of feeling deep shame stopped me from living free.

However, in my story of this loss, my biggest win has been the journey I have undertaken to access victim compensation and reparation. This I decided for myself will be at least one battle I will not lose. The number of roadblocks and barriers in getting this compensation was a horror. I applied for four lakhs INR as compensation, but I received only one lakh. I appealed to the higher legal services authority. I won. I was awarded the entire amount. I thought this was the end.

But I soon realised that there is a rule which mandates that 75% of the compensation goes into fixed deposit and I can access that only after 10 years! The shock and disbelief overwhelmed me for some time, but with the help of my lawyer, I appealed against this national policy to the highest court in my state. And I won!! This time the judge actually spoke about how adult survivors are capable and rightful owners of their compensation, and how the State was obliged to pay. I knew this judgment would set a precedent. It would help millions after me to access and utilize their compensation in the manner they wanted, when they needed it the most. And again I thought this was the end of this struggle.

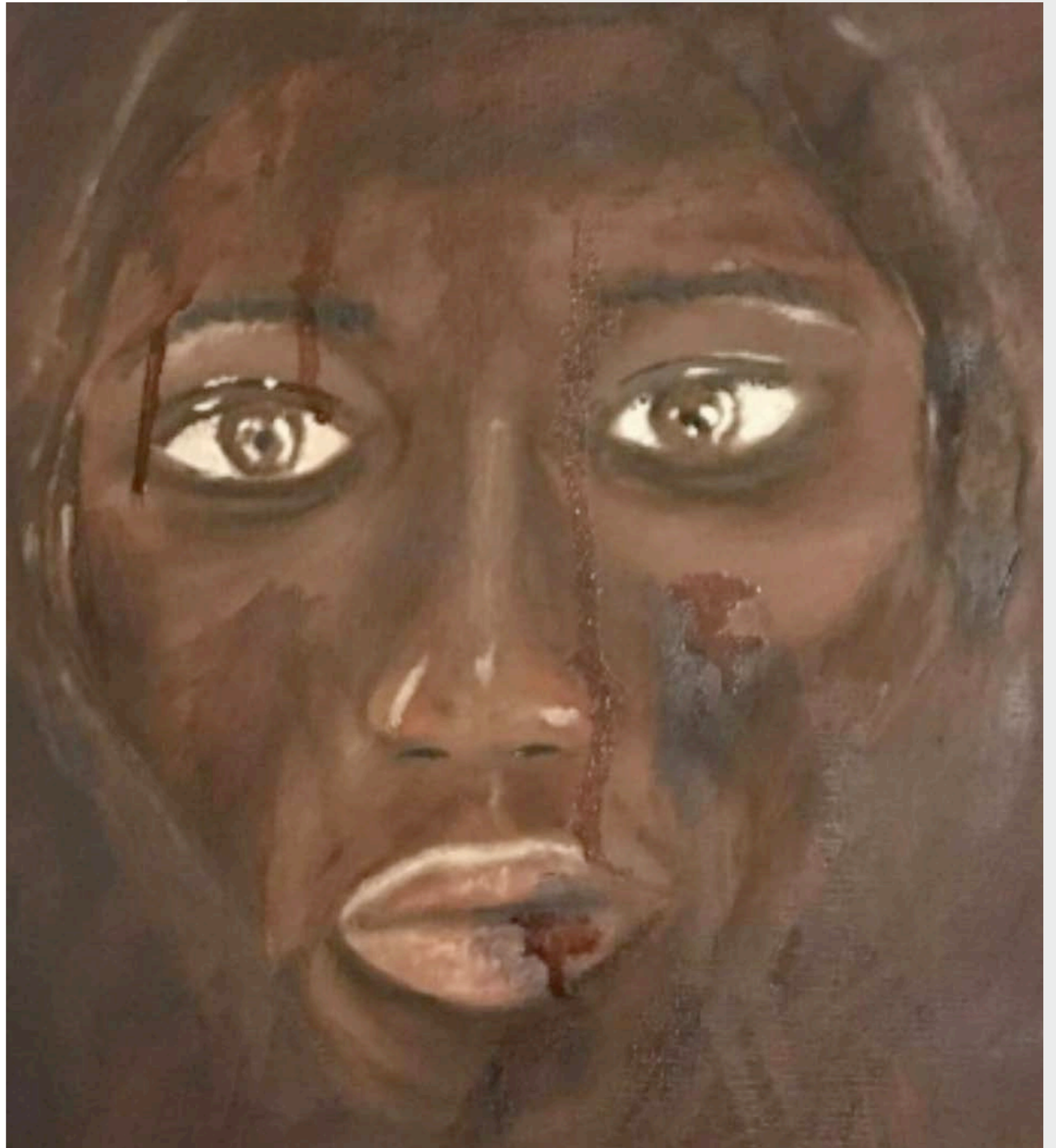
But again this was not to be. Now the state legal service has re-appealed against this judgment and my win suddenly seems so tentative. The purpose of my life has become to render visible the value of fighting back – of keeping the will to live life to its fullest – and to tell a story of hope.

*Simran*

# The Language of Survival

What does it mean to be a 'survivor' of human trafficking and modern-day slavery? This term 'survivor' is chosen deliberately by members of Survivor Alliance, and it is central to the way in which survivors perceive and empower themselves. Here, members of Survivor Alliance reflect on why that term is so important to them on their journeys.

*Painting by Alicia*





# A Conversation on Survival

SURVIVOR ALLIANCE GROUP

**The word ‘survivor’ is empowering.** When we use the word victim, we’re stuck in the mindset of someone who isn’t able to break free, to achieve, to move on.

**When I think of myself as a survivor,** I connect myself to people who have been to war and who carry medals, or someone who has survived an illness. We have overcome and accomplished.

**A survivor** is someone who is able to transform the pain into strength.

**The word survivor** means ‘one that tough and unchosen life experience has reshaped in order to engage with a better future’.

**If we’re not careful about the language,** we come to be put into categories. ‘Victim’ is another way of oppressing.

**A victim and survivor are two different things.** Victim is the person who is still experiencing their journey through the traffickers; survivor is the point you reach at the end of that journey.

**As victim, you depend on others.** But as a survivor, you are independent.

**There are many people who talk and write about us and what we need but we do not often have the chance to represent ourselves in our own voice.** Often, when we’re asked for interviews, the person interviewing has limited experience of the subject and only wants part of the story. They want the sob story, pictures – but there isn’t aftercare for that. And they don’t want to hear about the positives - what you can accomplish as a survivor. People want to play the role of saviour, but not of empowerer.

**When people hear the word ‘survivor’, they might proceed with caution –** they don’t know how to approach you as a ‘survivor’. It’s like when someone dies – you don’t know whether to approach them or not.

**The experience of being a survivor gives you the confidence** to know that what is thrown at us in life is not always fatal by

itself. It has the potential to strengthen us, and to strengthen others.

**The healing process** from the experiences we have gone through takes a good span of our lives if not an entire lifetime.

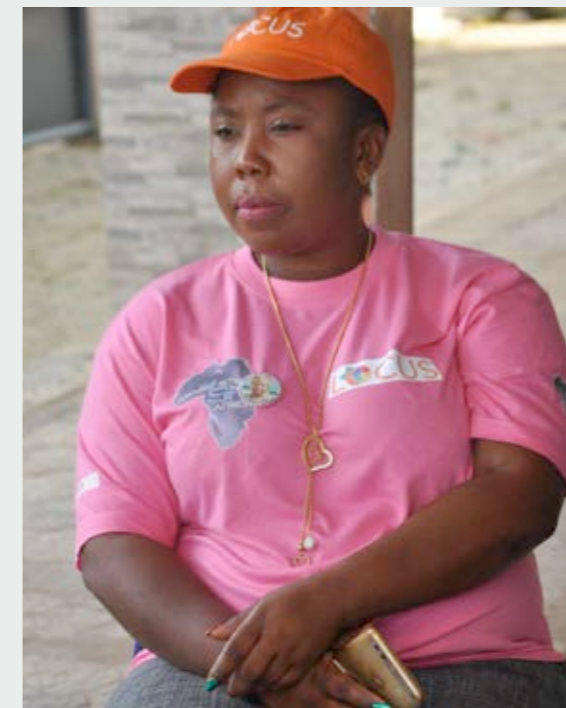
**We learn lessons from our experience that make us so sensitive** that we are not understood by many.

**What helped me to survive was knowing** that although I did not have more power than the oppressors, I nevertheless had the power to decide how to look at my experiences.

**Don’t forget that as a survivor, you become an inspiration to others.** Don’t feel shameful or to blame; tell others that whatever you go through, there is still always a pathway to freedom and your dreams. And you can build a network with other survivors. Together, we can stand together and change things.

## Survivor Profile: Francisca

Awah Francisca Mbuli is a survivor of sex and labor trafficking and almost a victim of organ trafficking. She is the founding director of Survivors’ Network, a Cameroonian NGO comprised of trafficking survivors that raises awareness, helps victims to escape their trafficking situations, and offers temporary housing, vocational training, and other essential services that survivors need for successful reintegration. As a survivor, she uses her experience to educate and prevent others in Cameroon from experiencing human trafficking.



Since 2015, her organization has helped 28 women from West and Central Africa free themselves from their situations of forced labour, including debt bondage, in the Middle East. Under her leadership, Survivors’ Network has built a unique approach to survivor empowerment by focusing on economic independence and fostering entrepreneurship among women and girls. She has provided guidance to more than 1000 victims of trafficking, and her organization has helped create economic opportunities for more than 400 survivors and internally displaced women across Cameroon by providing micro financing to small businesses and income-generating projects as well as job and small business training.

She has sought out creative ways to reach different communities and socioeconomic groups throughout the country, including through appearances on national and international television and radio stations, door to door advocacy, and even children’s comic books about human trafficking. She advocates for better protections and support services for trafficking victims with Cameroonian and foreign government ministries. Through the outreach campaigns and partnerships formed with international non-profit organizations and her grassroots workshops and programs, Ms. Awah Mbuli and the Survivor’s Network have raised the level of awareness among Cameroonian children, women, men and others around the world.

[www.freedomforall.org/survivors-network](http://www.freedomforall.org/survivors-network)

# Thoughts on Survival

**Being a survivor means to have taken a journey** – from a victim to a survivor to a leader. We all start as victims when we are living in a situation in which we are deprived of rights – when we don't have choices or voices. But when you start to use your voice, to make choices, and begin to gain resources then you start to survive exploitation, deprivations and violence.

**Most victims survive**, so they can claim rights and entitlements for themselves. But how many survivors will become leaders? That's a different matter. When I'm able to say not just what I need and want but to speak for ten others as well, then I know I've begun to move towards leadership. As a leader, I now have a goal and a mission for thousands of others.

**It takes time and struggle** to make this journey from victim to survivor to leader.

**When I'm addressed as a victim** it pulls me back into a mindset of humiliation and control – as though I'm being taken into a cage. This term is an insult to someone who has survived and who is now leading.

**As survivors, the world has opened up to us in ways that are both positive and negative.** Some

of us come from small villages and we did not know the world was full of so many different types of crime. It is only as a trafficking victim that you then realise what it means to have your rights violated – what power abuse means. Yet only as a victim do you realise your human rights – and that you must fight for them. Now, I attend international meetings and speak up on behalf of many other women. My world has become bigger – for better, and for worse.

**Because we've gone on this journey, we have come to learn the power of one's own voice** – to be able to speak up and not to be silenced by others. Even today, girls are not taken seriously in many of our communities. So we are working to fight against stigma, and to change the story for other women and girls. And in turn, we are also able to stand up for people fighting against other forms of stigma.

**There was a time when I was stigmatised.** But now, I am fighting for others – and the community looks to me for intervention and for help.

**The spirit of the survivor is life-energy.** It helps to rebuild dreams and hopes, and broken connections. That is what survivors collect through this experience

of victimhood. And then, we can dream, connect, build more. It is this life-energy that distinguishes a survivor from a victim.

**To other survivors, I would say:** shame does not belong to you. Don't let shame ever stand in the way of your growth.

**You will need courage as your companion** through this journey – so make friends with it.

**While you're on this journey,** don't forget to reach out to others who are walking with you. Keep holding hands – you don't need to do this by yourself. Don't forget to trust and love yourself first – you will always have yourself. Then trusting the world becomes easier.

**These are our life-stories, and our journeys.** We hope that reading these words will also help you on your journeys, and that they lead you closer to your own dreams and destinations.

*Utthan Survivors Group*



# Thoughts on the Home Office

Many of those who have survived human trafficking and modern-day slavery face another battle once they have managed to break free from their traffickers, as they enter into their journey through the UK immigration system. The Home Office is a significant feature of that journey, and inspires strong feelings amongst many survivors. For some, it is a test of endurance; for others, it is even considered a similar experience to that of being trafficked. For others, meanwhile, there is a sense of relief at the regular – if very modest – financial support it may offer. In this section, survivors reflect on the Home Office through conversation, and through poetry.

*Photo Adam Birkett*



# Conversation on the Home Office

The only thing that was different between my trafficker and the Home Office was the sex involved. Now, there is no sex. But the depression that I am dragged through is the same. We become a victim again in the process of getting our status. Immigration does not believe me – we are still in bondage and at another level of trafficking. But I have not allowed this negativity to affect my mind. People often think that once they've

entered the NRM (National Referral Mechanism), that's the end of their journey. But it is just a step. Other survivors should be aware that they're entering into a process: it's going to be hard, but be prepared so you don't hit rock bottom when things don't go well. You have to be really strong to have the self-determination to withstand what the Home Office does.

The way the Home Office treats us is to put us in limbo. It will take time to heal from this. But as survivors, we are motivated and strong, so we must be prepared for a long run. This is not an easy journey: I've come out from my trafficker and pretend I'm free, but I'm not. The system puts a barrier around me. I can fly, but not in the sky – I am still in a cage of a different sort.

*Survivor Alliance Group*

# Learn to Appreciate

The Home Office,  
The charities,  
Hand in hand  
You stand together.

Lost jobs,  
Unpaid bills,  
Hurt families,  
Homelessness.

Covid took so much  
From so many.

To the Home Office:  
Thank you.  
The charity:  
Thank you.

In a time of bewilderment, chaos and hurt,  
You give me my warm home,  
You give me my food, full.  
You enable a life, mine.  
£37 a week from you.

So from me  
to you,

Thank you  
For everything.

*Uaepa Mbunga*

# Asylum Process

When you first hear the name  
You think it's something beautiful  
All because everyone is talking about it.  
While still an unknown survivor,  
You believe asylum will be your rescue process

You believe it is heaven on earth  
Because where you seek help, they send you to him.  
Excited you get thinking you can now sleep,  
All those memories now just a dream.

It is surprising how many think it's a blessing to be on asylum -  
If not seeking asylum being with your friend NRM  
Because they don't know what we all go through  
Especially when you had your life all planned.

Asylum process, you have destroyed me  
Together with your friend NRM.  
Had I known I would have chosen not to meet you  
Because all you did was to depress and torture me.

You told yourself that I am fine while I am not.  
You assumed this because you gave me a roof under which to stay and the  
Little food you bought me,  
But you never actually asked what it is that I yearn for.

You made sure you limited my movements,  
Just like my traffickers.  
Many years I hoped you would come and release me  
But you never looked back after keeping me tied.

I could not dream anymore  
Because even if I dreamt, I could never reach my dreams.  
Most of my dreams got shattered  
Because you buried my capabilities.  
When the sun went down  
I got scared, fearing mainly for my stance with you  
For I feared anytime you could drop by -

That you would show up at night when I am asleep  
And command that I leave your dwelling.  
Like a criminal I lived in your accommodation  
When all I needed was peace and assurance.  
Asylum process, you are cruel -  
Your cruelty traumatises the already-traumatised.  
Would it be okay to ask you and your friend NRM  
To consider survivors in your process?

*KJ*



## Letters to the World

If you could make your voice heard to anyone, to whom would you choose to speak? This was the question posed to members of Survivor Alliance. As survivors of human trafficking and modern-day slavery, SA members have often found themselves unable to contact people they need for help at crucial times in their lives. In other instances, they have found themselves within systems that do not seem to listen to them, and in which they cannot make their voices heard. Having the opportunity to write to those they would like to hear them the most therefore presents an opportunity for catharsis – and for self-empowerment. In some cases, SA members have chosen to write to those in charge of the systems they wish to change: people otherwise out of reach. In others, though, they speak to people known to them intimately – their children; even, in displays of enormous courage, to those who have perpetrated crimes against them.

## Dear Home Office Single Competent Authority,

I want to say a big THANK YOU for not believing in my story. THANK YOU for making me feel like my perpetrator was right to exploit me. THANK YOU for saying that I was inconsistent in my statement even though it was clear I wasn't in my right mind when the first responder was writing the statement for me.

You have made me understand that what the UK Government is saying to the world about what they are doing to support survivors of human trafficking is NOT what we see or receive.

I wish I'd had the chance to tell you that I am not where I want to be. But I am proud that I am not where I used to be!

I want to say THANK YOU for pushing me to use my voice to change the world.

*Sister J.*



## Dear President of the DR of Congo,

It is an honor to be able to speak to you as a citizen of the very country your Excellence is honored to be presiding over today.

I would like to tell you about two forms of abuse and human exploitation that are currently occurring and that you have power to target for the good of human dignity.

First, I invite you to please use your voice so as to bring an end to the practice that consists of pricing the dowry when a lady wants to marry. This is resulting in so much social abuse of women and girls, and it is becoming a human trafficking practice.

Second, I want you to know about

we Banyindu indigenous people living in Mwenga district in the South Kivu Province. As a tribal community, we have welcomed other tribes onto our ancestral soil and have kindly offered means for them to sustain their daily lives. We peacefully offered to share our Bunyindu Kingdom ancestral rivers and soil with them.

How come some of the very guests we welcomed have sought to impose their strange 'Kimbilikiti' cultural practices on my people? Don't we have the right to keep our Banyindu indigenous cultural identity as we inherited it from our ancestors?

For instance - two months almost every year they insist that all

grown men join their secret Lega rituals. And whenever their people ride through my native village's streets, I and any other man who has not yet taken part in their rituals has to hide under the bed or face beatings, insults or being taken captive by them to the bush to endure whatever treatment for days...

That is not just, and I appeal to you, Your Excellence the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). We are Banyindu Indigenous People and we have the right to resist the acculturation of the neighboring Warega tribe that we originally welcomed into our ancestral Bunyindu Kingdom.

With best regards,

*Michel MI Ndashuba.*



# Statement to the Police

You ask me why I will not give a statement to the police.

Let me give you a summary of things both said and implied by some police officers about girls caught up in sexual exploitation cases:

'Nothing but trouble. Inconsistent. Not worth police time. Asking for it. Foolish. Drunkards. Misleading. Prostitutes with too much make-up. Pests.'

I have been one of those girls, and I want to set the record straight. It is vitally important that you, the police – protectors of society – take time to look at this serious issue from the point of view of the victims. Please believe sexual exploitation is something massive and understanding is essential in tackling it. Girls like me understand it because we have lived it. Some of us may never escape the far-reaching consequences of having suffered from this type of crime, and to discount our knowledge is to throw away a valuable asset.

Let me paint you a scene.

You've been at work all day. You're tired. You didn't have time to take your lunch break. And sitting in front of you is a girl you've seen four times in the past week, as she's phoned the station in trouble needing to be rescued from various situations. For the fourth time you've all but begged her to make a statement and she hasn't cooperated. You're frustrated. You're stressed. You just want to go home and you cannot for the life of you understand why this girl is refusing to answer your most basic questions. At first you were eager to try and help but you're now convinced

she doesn't want help, and you're wondering if she's doing this for attention - you know, getting in the cars, knowing full well what those men are like. Why does she agree? Why does she have contact with the men who want to hurt her and then blow every opportunity to grass them up?

At first the girl was eager to get help too. You were the twenty-fourth officer who has promised her all the protection in the world in return for a video interview. After meeting with her sixth officer and the threats continuing, she's thinking, 'What's the point?' Interviews and statements aside, the problem is just not going away and she's still abducted off the streets by these guys trying to hurt her, and she's followed home. Her home is attacked and there are incessant calls and texts and so of course she's going to call the station, because although she's lost all faith in you and your colleagues fixing the problem long-term, she knows that getting in contact will get her a couple of hours of safety as she's locked in an interrogation room. It saves her being locked in the bedroom, anyway.

The girl explained to you, early on, that she has no faith in the system. You told her it would be different this time and are annoyed that she won't believe you. She's annoyed that you won't believe her and trust in her experience of how things have been handled. To you she is a case that you can do nothing with. To her you are another person who just doesn't understand. Just when she starts to think, 'Maybe this time it will be different', and she's contemplating how to go through the trauma of explaining the whole horror story again from scratch, you've given up and sent her on her way. She loved that one officer, the lady

officer, who listened and made her feel safe; you then took the one lady officer off the case. The girl missed her, because she thought she cared. Next week there will be someone else working the case. Next week she will have to repeat herself over and over again, but will be told she is confused, inconsistent and doesn't make sense. Maybe she doesn't - but neither does why those men chose her.

She is not being dramatic for the sake of trying to keep your attention. Interviews are standard procedure for you; for us they really are trauma. You are asking us to relive abuse that is still raw, and then repeat it over again as you pick it apart.

You want to get a picture of the crimes; we want nothing more than to get those pictures out of our heads. You want us to speak up, but we've spent the last couple of years being conditioned to believe that we have no voice.

You told us to trust you: well so did our abusers. You said you were on our side, and that you'd take care of us - so did they. I know you are a police officer, but you are also a man and in the world I live in men equal people who put you down and use you up.

You said you would believe me, but you ask me so many questions I'm now struggling to believe myself. You said "Look at me, I'm an officer," and I said "All I can see are your handcuffs, sir."

They looked at me, stared at me; you pay close attention too, trying to figure out my body language. They took photographs of my body; you snap pictures of my wounds. They promised me the world; you promised me justice. Neither of you said promises can be broken.

They hurt me with their words as well as their fists. I expect it of them. But words from someone in authority cut deeper. They told me I was worthless, but I never truly felt it until you asked my friends and

family if they thought I was a prostitute. I found it hard to keep track of their names; I find it harder to keep track of your badge numbers.

You said that my story didn't add up. Do you really believe it makes sense in my head either? This is not how I envisioned living my life. I don't get a kick out of you asking me if I enjoy being victimised. You said I put myself at risk. I know that no matter what I've done, the past few months has resulted in risk and I did not ask for it. I enjoyed the car ride, I enjoyed feeling special. I enjoyed the few vodkas, but no I didn't ask to be raped or passed around like a rag doll; I didn't ask for my clothes to be ripped off.

You criticise me for not being clear. I can barely think straight. If I tell you the truth, maybe you would think I am a slag or slut...maybe I would get into trouble, because they said it's my fault.

You are annoyed with me for not giving you descriptions. I'm terrified because they said they'd kill me if I identified them. You say you can't take my call, because you're getting off at five. They tell me they'll be round at mine for six. Their cars have loud music, to disorientate; your cars have sirens. They drove me around to different addresses and parks, anywhere they could have sex. I sat in the back of their car and tried to forget. You drive me around, asking me where it happened, telling me to point the places out. I sat in the back of your car; you won't let me forget.

They hurt me, touched my private parts. I tried to say no. You said the nurse needs swabs and it's my choice. She touched me in those parts too. I tried to tell you I'm scared.

Now ask me again why I didn't give that statement.

*Anonymous*



# My Dear Jack,

I wish you had been born into a better world. I wasn't sure about having children: I was scared of injustice and greed as well as the devastation of natural resources and the consequences that these things would have for our lives. I always thought that in spite of earth's beauty – the glorious Andes mountains, marvellous lakes and rainforests of South America, dramatic cliffs at the seashore and overwhelming colours of the sky at sunset – this world wasn't nice. In spite of the mysteries of the deep sea and the universe and all its creatures, a vast amount of hate and devastation has taken place on our little planet.

However, I knew that having you was going to be an amazing learning journey for me as a human being. I was willing to grow with you. So I embraced the maternal instinct living in me.

Look at it now...in the middle of this pandemic! I couldn't have imagined this nightmare. People walking along with masks, not able to breathe safely, not able to hug their loved ones, not able to play with their friends, not even able to travel and enjoy our planet.

I wish I'd had the chance to tell you when you were a free soul somewhere in the universe: 'Look my darling, the world is unfair, life is hard and everything you want is going to be hard work; you need to persevere and be committed to yourself to achieve big and even

small dreams. To find true friends is difficult and you will be lucky if you can count them on the fingers of one hand. Death is the only certainty we have. You will lose many people along the way, because ironically life is full of death. Although I believe death is a kind of liberation, when someone passes away you will miss the person and the moments you spent with them'.

I want to apologise for my lack of patience and for throwing stuff out of the window. Apologies for wanting to look after you so much that I take away part of your freedom. Apologies for the schools that I cannot change though this is my dream.

I want to thank you for being brave and for coming into this world. I want to thank you for choosing me as your mum and staying with me by my side in all my battles. I want to thank you for your beautiful eyes full of joy and your loud laugh when we play and run, your little teeth and the big ones that are coming.

With all my love and much more,

Mum.

*Explorer*

# Perpetrators Lend Me Your Ears!

I want you to know what I have learned from you.

I have come to see that human and sexual exploitation doesn't happen spontaneously. It is always carefully planned. David Finkelhor stated that the following 'preconditions' have to be overcome before the abuse takes place:

1. Motivation to abuse,
2. Overcoming the internal inhibitors,
3. Overcoming the external inhibitors,
4. Overcoming the victim's resistance.

Human exploiters plan their moves carefully so as to avoid detection, using every method available – from coercion to manipulation to blackmail to threats to bribery, until they have 'overcome the victim's resistance'.

Human exploiters use a tactic called 'grooming' to win the trust and confidence of their victims. And the grooming process can take a while before the abuse proper takes place.

Human traffickers target vulnerable children and women. Their vulnerability could be the need for love or security or support, attention, companionship, or protection. Not everyone is an easy target and predators know this very well. Economic violence can be as devastating as sexual or physical violence. It is also equally traumatizing.

Victims of human trafficking feel a sense of entrapment, thus the inability to leave the exploitation unless helped or rescued. Imagine being sexualized and having to deal with blackmail, coercion, manipulation, threats from the perpetrators... Escape becomes difficult.

Violence does not have to be the actual suffering of real injury or harm. The threat of harm to one's person or image, emotional manipulation, is also violence.

Exposed perpetrators know very well how to win public sympathy or support, how to manipulate public emotions, how to make victims the villains of the piece. They cry 'victimhood'. They blame the victims of the abuse. They apologise for the harm they have done but half-heartedly. They engage in distorted rationalization and shift responsibility to Satan or blame a lapse of judgment on their part. They would accept everything but full responsibility for their abuse.

It is not up to bystanders to judge what forms of exploitation are 'worse' than others. No one form of exploitation, be it rape or sexual exploitation or domestic servitude or economic exploitation or intrusive touching or leering, is more devastating than the other. And it's only the survivors who can determine the extent or magnitude of the violation.

The government's silence on human trafficking can be more hurtful to survivors than the abuse experienced. Such a stance can lead to double traumatising.

Perpetrators, hear this:

May the system use their policy, influence and power to fight human trafficking and modern-day slavery, to condemn and arrest perpetrators who exploit. May they refuse to be bystanders to the abuse of humanity. Dante warned that 'the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality'. I want you to know that I for one do not stand neutral.

*Sister J.*





