

Lebanon: A child separated from her child



*Painting by SB Overseas
beneficiary in Lebanon*

*By Jade-Leigh Tenwick, Communications and Development Officer
at SB OverSeas*

At twelve years old, Yosser was asked for her hand in marriage. Her life had been normal up until the disruption caused by the Syrian conflict. She had spent her childhood going to school and playing with her friends in the neighbourhood. This all changed with the outbreak of the civil war which led to her family seeking refuge in Lebanon when she was nine years old. Three years later, an eighteen year old boy sought her hand in marriage.

Her father at first refused as he was unsure of the marriage and its implications on Yosser's life. However her grandfather along with the rest of her family pushed the idea of marriage and she found herself, at age thirteen, at the local commune

registering to be married and living in a house full of strangers. Her family had spoke of marriage in an almost fairytale-like way and told her she would be happy. It only took three weeks for the fairytale to be shattered with one hit which turned into many more. The violence was random and trivial. Asking for some chocolate was one of the instances given for him hitting her. After eight months of daily violence, she ran back to her family pregnant.

However, her family were not supportive of her decision to leave and forced her to return to her husband. One day, in a fit of anger he tore up their marriage papers so that there was no proof of them being married. This had serious ramifications as the child would be assumed to be born out of wedlock meaning not only would he carry the social stigma of being an illegitimate child in the society, but also he would be unable to register in Lebanon.

This led to Yosser's family seeking legal advice from the UNHCR and with the help of a lawyer, they received not only acknowledgment of the marriage, but also a divorce paper. However along with the divorce came the realisation that her unborn child would be given to the husband from the moment of birth.

Yosser is now attending SB OverSeas empowerment courses where she is given a safe space to talk about the experience she went through as well as receiving support to deal with the trauma of separating from her child. One day, with our support, we hope that she will have the opportunity to dream again.

SB OverSeas has three schools and empowerment centres in Lebanon working to serve those displaced from the Syrian conflict. We believe education and empowerment is the key to a better future and that every child should be afforded the right to it.

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TUNISIA: ‘I Can Finally Dream’: Tunisia Expands Protection for Battered Women

By Lilia Blaise

NY Times (12.05.2018) – <https://nyti.ms/2KtJ3K6> – For women like Sihem Ben Romdhane, the options used to be fewer. Her husband of 19 years often beat her and she lodged complaints

with the police, who told her they would have to jail him.

So she would withdraw her complaints each time “because I don’t want my children to be without their father,” she said. Then last November, her husband started beating their 9-year-old son.

“I just could not take it anymore,” she said in an interview in Gafsa, the hard-bitten Tunisian mining town where she lives.

Ms. Ben Romdhane, a Libyan national who has lived in Tunisia for the past 20 years, decided to leave and found refuge in a shelter in Gafsa for battered women.

It is one of just a handful of shelters that have newly opened in the country after Parliament passed a law last year outlawing a broad range of specific violent acts against women, as well as discrimination against them. The law also urged the opening of new shelters and other facilities to protect women in emergency situations.

Tunisia has always prided itself on being the most advanced Arab country when it comes to women’s rights. Women here have long had the right to divorce and gain custody of their children, and polygamy was abolished the year after the country became independent in 1956.

Yet violence against women remains a widespread and persistent

problem. Economic violence and domestic sexual abuse are among the most prevalent types of aggression.

In 2016, 60 percent of Tunisian women were victims of domestic violence, according to the Ministry of Women, Family and Children, with studies from nongovernmental groups suggesting the figure may even be higher. And 50 percent of women said they had experienced aggression in a public area at least once in their lives.

Legislators and women's activists say they are hoping to reduce those numbers with the new law and the shelters that opened at the recommendation of the legislation.

From outside, the new shelter in Gafsa looks like an ordinary house. The inside is homey except for the schedule on the kitchen door, which sets out the hours to eat and clean. The storage closet is stocked with sanitary pads, toothbrushes and clothes.

"Sometimes the women who come here ran away from a desperate situation with no luggage whatsoever. So we provide everything," said Sonia Mhamdi, the manager of the intake center that is the first stop for women in distress before they are placed in shelters.

There are seven women's shelters in Tunisia, funded by the European Union. Most opened after the country's Arab Spring revolution, which began in December 2010 and inspired a string of uprisings around the Middle East and North Africa. The

shelters offer protection, legal advice, some free job training, child care, and psychological and medical treatment.

While the new law and the shelters are breakthroughs, the next challenge is to broaden awareness of the changes and to get more abused women to make use of the new institutions and measures to protect them. The police, judges and doctors must also be made aware of the provisions of the new law.

“We need to educate children and their parents to respect family values, which include women’s rights,” said the minister of women, family and children, Néziha Labidi.

The legislation outlaws domestic rape and bars a rapist from marrying his victim in order to diminish his sentence. Police can face jail time if they refuse to take a woman’s abuse complaint or try to dissuade her from lodging one. Even if the victim drops the charges in a case of violence against women, the investigation is still required to go on.

Reporting of domestic abuse has increased, yet the rate of prosecutions remains low. According to the Ministry of Justice, 5,569 complaints of violence against women were registered between 2016 and 2017. But more than half of them were dropped or dismissed.

Sexual harassment is punishable by two years in prison, and the law goes as far as to oblige any witness of violence against women to report it. It also sets up specific courts and judges dedicated to violence against women as well as

special police units, mostly led by women.

“The new law is innovative because before, when the woman was abused and forgave the abuser, he would not be punished by law,” said Amor Yahyaoui, a general inspector for the Ministry of Justice. “Now even if the woman forgives him, he will face the law and he will be accountable.”

The shelter in Gafsa is one of the newer ones, located in one of Tunisia’s more impoverished and conservative regions.

For Ms. Ben Romdhane, 45, the shelter in Gafsa helped her build a legal case against her husband and learn ways to protect herself.

“The women in the center provided me with legal assistance and also psychological support,” she said. “I know my rights, but I need support to be sure that my children will remain safe in the process and benefit from at least some help.”

Officials in Tunisia have traditionally been unsympathetic toward battered women, often telling them to go back to their husbands, said Khaoula Matri, a sociologist who worked on violence against women in Tunisia.

“The new law offers a lot of legal safeguards to avoid such behavior. But will the mind-set change as well?” she said.

Ms. Mhamdi, the manager of the intake center, said just renting a suitable house required lengthy negotiations with the community. Homeowners feared trouble from the husbands or the families and single mothers are generally not well perceived in Tunisian society, she said.

“The neighbors on the street all had to sign a charter,” she said. “The charter states that they agree to the presence of this center here and that they will do everything to protect the privacy and the security of these women. The confidentiality of the place is really important. We can’t have angry husbands coming here to look for their wives.”

Women must be in an emergency situation or immediate danger to get a spot in the Gafsa shelter.

Twelve women have come to the shelter since it opened last year. They stay anywhere from a few days to four months. The bedrooms have also beds for children and a roof terrace is walled for privacy from the neighbors. The shelter staff say they often play the role of mediator between couples or families.

“It is hard because the women still prefer to get a divorce rather than go through a trial for domestic abuse,” said Salah Chragua, the shelter’s psychologist. “There is the question of the children, but also the shame it might cause in front of a conservative society.”

Another woman, Jomaa Z., said she came to the shelter after

being badly injured by her spouse. The 34-year-old said she did not want to disclose her full identity because she feared her husband. She stayed a month with her children.

“I went back to him and it scared him to see that I was able to leave like that, that I did not need him,” she said in an interview at the shelter. “He changed after that. The next step for me is divorce, but I am afraid of raising my children alone,” she added.

Despite the conservatism of the society in Gafsa, there are signs of change. In February, the regional court sentenced a man under the new law to two years in jail after his wife accused him of repeated sodomy.

“Women and men come every day to the court for marriage issues and to ask for child support and women do not hesitate to complain about their violent husbands,” said Mohamed Khlefi, the public prosecutor of the Gafsa court. “It is not taboo anymore.”

In the Gafsa shelter, one of the success stories is Salima Abidi, who is 50 and single and used to be jobless. She never got married because she was at home caring for her sick mother. She did not finish high school, and after her mother died, she ended up living with her father and brother who did not want her.

“I was a burden for them despite all that I sacrificed for my family. It quickly became verbal and physical,” she said.

“Both my brother and my father blamed me for staying with them, so I finally left.”

She spent three months at the shelter, mostly to build up her self-esteem but also to learn how to be financially independent.

“I felt abandoned and it is really hard here to be a single woman with no family,” she said. She now has a job as a building manager and lives in a center for women who have no family in exchange for a meager rent.

“I am free. I have some money set aside. I can finally dream and think about my future,” she said. “I know my relatives inquired about me. But I am not ready to see them again.”

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UK: More than 1,000 cases of forced marriage in UK last year, report says

Official unit says issue is hidden crime and figures may not reflect full scale of abuse

By Nadia Khomami

The Guardian (10.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2rzmye0> – Nearly 1,200 possible forced marriage cases were flagged up to a specialist service last year, figures show.

Of the 1,196 reports handled by the government's Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), more than a quarter involved victims below the age of 18, while one in five related to male victims.

The total number of cases registered in 2017 was down by 19% on the previous year, but officials said the fall did not represent a decrease in prevalence of forced marriage in the UK.

Forcing someone to marry against their will is a criminal offence that carries a maximum sentence of seven years. A forced marriage is defined as one in which one or both spouses

do not consent to the union, and violence, threats or any other form of coercion are involved.

Established in 2005, the FMU is jointly run by the Home Office and the Foreign Office. Since 2012, the facility has provided support in 1,200 to 1,400 cases a year.

But a report published by the two departments on Thursday stressed that the statistics only represented cases reported to the unit, adding: "Forced marriage is a hidden crime, and these figures may not reflect the full scale of the abuse."

The figures show 355 cases involved victims below 18 years of age, including 186 relating to victims aged 15 or younger.

While the majority (78%) of reports logged in 2017 related to female victims, 256, or 21%, involved male victims. "This demonstrates that men can also be forced into marriage," the report said.

It emphasised that forced marriage is not a problem specific to one country or culture, noting that the unit has handled cases relating to more than 90 nations across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

In 2017, the FMU dealt with cases relating to 65 "focus" countries. This could be the country where the forced marriage is due to take place, or the country that the spouse is currently residing in, or both.

The four countries with the highest number of cases last year were Pakistan (439 cases), Bangladesh (129), Somalia (91) and India (82).

In 120 instances there was no overseas element, with the potential or actual forced marriage taking place entirely within the UK.

A spokesperson for the children's charity NSPCC said the figures echoed reports to Childline, "with children as young as 13 contacting us worried about being forced into marriage yet fearing they will be cut out of their community if they refuse".

The charity said forced marriage was a form of child abuse and the secretive nature of it made it difficult to grasp the true scale of the problem.

"The worry and fears children face in this situation can also lead them to self harm, to run away from home putting them at risk of further abuse, or even to contemplate taking their own lives," the spokesperson said.

Girls as young as 13 have contacted Childline about being forced into marriage, with 205 counselling sessions on the issue in 2016-17, a 12% increase from 2015-16. There were 6,099 visits to the Childline forced marriage page in the same year.

“We would urge anyone worried about a child to speak up before it is too late, so that we can get help and prevent them being bound into something they would never ask for,” the spokesperson said.

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LEBANON: No choice left for a girl but to marry



**Painting by SB Overseas
beneficiary in Lebanon**

SB Overseas (04.05.2018) – No one escapes war unchanged. Who can lose the past and the future at once without bearing a scar? The young and old are marked, though for most, these marks take invisible forms.

Nadine wishes hers were less apparent. The burns on her hands, neck, and face tell of her loss before she can say a word. She never meant to carry her village's story this way, to become to her community an unmistakable reminder of their suffering, but she did not get to choose.

When war came to Syria, it did not take long for the bombing to reach even her quiet village. If she ever manages someday to forget what the explosions sounded like, she will not forget what they felt like on her skin.

Her family fled to Lebanon four years ago, settling reluctantly in the skeleton of an unfinished and abandoned building where they live again amongst their neighbors from their hometown in Syria—now amid garbage and dust instead of sweet air and green fields. Their small rooms are stifling in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter, but they rarely

leave the shelter, feeling out of place in the rest of the city.

Nadine began attending school, where she was confident and talkative in class. This education allowed her to make progress in Arabic, English, math, and science and to quickly make up for years of school she had missed since leaving her village, where her school had been bombed. She excelled in her schoolwork and was placed in the most advanced classes. Besides academics, Nadine and other girls her age took art lessons at school with a Syrian artist who encouraged them to express themselves: their experience as young girls, their ambitions, and their country, thus building on their self-worth.

She told her friends and teachers that she did not want to be married at an early age, as some of her peers were doing. School was important to her, and she planned to finish her education before getting married. She would marry after completing university, she said.

But there was a boy who lived in the same shelter whom Nadine liked, and this worried her parents. They were afraid that he would propose marriage and that she would find herself trapped in conditions like these for the rest of her life: between the dirty walls of a dark building in a city that was not hers, a country that did not want her.

When Nadine's parents remembered her grandfather's hope from her childhood that she would marry a certain man from her village, they acted quickly. He was still living in Syria.

Within days, they sent Nadine away to marry him. She was fourteen.

Nadine returned to an area that was still unsafe, plagued by the same war that she had fled, the same bombs that once had almost taken her life.

And piece by piece, her own life and childhood continued to be stolen from her.

When her husband saw her burns, he refused to marry her. He had been told that they were less noticeable. Eventually, his mother forced him to marry Nadine because she had already moved back to Syria to accept his offer. They had no wedding.

Nadine's friends feel sorry for her because they have heard of the couple's problems. They wonder if her husband will marry another woman, or if she will soon be divorced, but her grandfather lives nearby in Syria and would not want to allow her to give up on a marriage he requested. Everyone who lives in her family's shelter knows that Nadine and her husband do not love each other, and that she will soon be expected to have children. But she is only a girl herself.

And so, again, without a choice, and this time in a way that is not so outwardly evident, Nadine has become a keeper of her country's sorrow.

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LEBANON: A better tomorrow, 'Bukhra Ahla'

Part of the child marriage story series.



Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon

Written by Jade-Leigh Tenwick, Communications and Development Officer at SB OverSeas

SB OverSeas (18.04.2018) – Lamis is a seventeen year old girl. A seventeen year old girl who is called ‘the divorced woman’. Yet she is barely a woman. Born a year post millennium, she enjoyed her childhood in Syria which was spent going to school and playing with her friends. This all changed in 2012 when the Syrian war broke out. Her family, along with many other Syrian’ families fled their country as the conflict intensified and she found herself at eleven years old seeking refuge in Lebanon, a country where 1 in 4 people is a refugee.

Due to the harsh residency policy in Lebanon,^[1] Lamis and her family were often moving from place to place and this constant upheaval prevented her from attending school. With over three-quarters of Syrians in Lebanon living below the poverty line,^[2] there has been an increase in the rate of child marriage as it is viewed as the only viable way to provide protection for girls.

Lamis’ family were no exception. Struggling to provide security and food for the family, they viewed marriage as a way to secure Lamis’ future. Therefore, when a 22 year old boy from the neighborhood asked for permission from her family for Lamis to be his wife, they accepted, telling her it would be like a fairytale. Not having any experience of marriage or what would be expected of her, she went along with this agreement.

Shortly after the wedding, cracks began to appear. Her husband had different preconceptions as to what it meant to be married. These preconceptions were not ones that she could live up to. He and his family, started to punish her for this by beating her, sometimes until she bled. She could not understand what she had done wrong and experienced this abuse for six months before securing a divorce and escaping to her family.

However, her problems did not end here. Divorce in her community, like most communities, carries along with it a stigma. People on the street called her the 'divorced woman' and refused to acknowledge her by her name. She became an outcast and her family began to fear for her safety warning her not to be on the streets along.

We know of this story as Lamis is one of students at our SB OverSeas school. Despite the difficulties in coming to our school due to street harassment, she attends our classes as she wants to have a better future. She talks openly with others at the school of her experience and encourages them to make their own decision telling them that she wishes she was not married so young as she feels chained by the stigma. She hopes that her message will empower other girls to make their own decision and chose education instead of marriage as a means of security. For herself, she hopes that education will be the key to unlocking a better future and having, like the name of our centre, a better tomorrow: 'Bukhra Ahla'.

Lamis is just one of the many girls at our schools who have been affected by child marriage. SB OverSeas works to prevent the practice of child marriage by providing access to education for 1,400 refugee children in Lebanon and by

economically empowering women and girls through our vocational courses, as well as our self-development courses.

[1] Over 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not have legal residency:

<http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548d174/survey-finds-syrian-refugees-lebanon-poorer-vulnerable-2017.html>

[2] <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548d174/survey-finds-syrian-refugees-lebanon-poorer-vulnerable-2017.html>

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European Parliament committee urges end to child marriage

EU should act against the unlawful practice globally – and at home

HRW.org (16.04.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2HovyNH> – The European Union could do more to help end child marriage, and members of the European Parliament are working for it to do just that.

On Thursday, the parliament's Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee adopted an opinion calling for the EU's diplomatic arm to develop a clear strategy and dedicate funds to eradicating child and forced marriage by 2030.

This could not be more timely. Under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, countries around the world pledged to end child marriage – any marriage in which one or both spouses are under age 18 – by 2030.

Achieving this will be difficult. Child marriage occurs in every region of the world, in staggering numbers. About 15 million girls under 18 marry each year – one every two seconds. Every seven seconds, a girl under 15 marries. Most girls marry men over age 18 – in some cases, much older.

Research shows that child marriage is severely harmful. Married children often drop out of school and are locked in poverty as a result. Married girls often quickly become pregnant, and early pregnancy involves serious health risks – including death – for girls and their babies. Girls who marry are at higher risk of domestic violence than women who marry as adults.

The EU has a key role to play. The EU and many of its member states contribute significant amounts of aid to countries with high rates of child marriage. Donors can provide critical assistance for legal and policy reform in these countries. They can also help provide the support – access to education, sexual and reproductive health information and services, economic security, and social empowerment – girls need to escape child marriage.

There is also work for the EU to do at home. A number of EU member states still permit child marriage. Several countries – the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden – have banned child marriage (and non-EU Norway is considering doing so). But others – including Austria, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom, to name a few – have laws allowing children younger than 18 to marry under some circumstances.

The European Parliament's committee is on the right path to push the EU on this issue. The Foreign Affairs committee and the full parliament should not only adopt this opinion, but ultimately deliver a resolution calling on EU member states to take concerted action. Girls' lives depend on it.

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Portugal gender change law boosts transgender rights, protects infants

NewsMax (13.04.2018) – <https://nws.mx/2JUlqe9> – Portugal, a new gender change law approved Friday means transgender people in the country will no longer need to be diagnosed as mentally ill to legally change their gender and unnecessary surgery on intersex infants is banned.

Several European nations require transgender people to undergo medical procedures such as surgery and sterilization, be diagnosed with a mental disorder, and get divorced if married to have their desired gender legally recognized by government.

The law makes Portugal only the sixth European nation to allow a change of gender without medical or state intervention, according to ILGA-Europe, a network of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) groups.

It follows Malta, Norway, Denmark, Ireland and Belgium.

People who are transgender do not identify with the gender

they were born as, while intersex people have ambiguous genitalia that are not considered typically male or female.

“When trans people are trusted to take decisions for themselves, it signals respect (and) procedures are simplified,” said Transgender Europe’s senior policy officer Richard Kohler.

“It enables anyone who needs legal gender recognition to quickly get through with this bureaucratic step and continue with their lives,” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The law also means Portugal will become only the second nation in the world, after Malta, to ban medically unnecessary surgery on the genitals of intersex infants, activists said.

About 1.7 percent of the world’s population, or 129 million people, is thought to be born intersex, the United Nations says.

Doctors often perform surgery to “masculinize” or “feminize” the genitalia of intersex babies aged 2 or under in the belief it will make their lives easier and to ease parental distress.

Yet it can cause life-long pain, sterilization, loss of sexual sensation and health complications, campaigners say.

Rights groups such as Organisation Intersex International (OII) and StopIGM.org said Portugal's new law was insufficient.

Parents could circumvent the legislation and have surgeries performed on their children by claiming they were confident of their gender identity, said Kitty Anderson, co-chair of OII.

"The law . . . doesn't explicitly prohibit intersex genital mutilation (IGM), nor criminalize or adequately sanction IGM, nor address obstacles to access to justice and redress for IGM survivors," said Daniela Truffer, co-founder of StopIGM.org.

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NIGERIA: Muslim lawyers reject FCT high court's new dress code

By John Chuks Azu & Abass Jimoh

Daily Trust (10.04.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2HrdfVJ> – Muslim Lawyers' Association of Nigeria (MULAN) has rejected the new dress code for lawyers by the FCT High Court and the ban of hijab in the Law School.

In a statement released at the end of its National Executive Council meeting in Benin City, Edo State on March 31, MULAN condemns the directive that prohibits the use of any apparel underneath wigs by lawyers and by extension the hijab by female Muslim lawyers.

In the release signed by its president, Dr. Kamal Dawud, Esq., the association said the new rule ran contrary to the 2004 resolution of the Body of Benchers which allowed female Law School students and legal practitioners to use head cover underneath their wigs.

“On this ground and by the provisions of Section 38 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, this directive is unfortunate, draconian, illegal, unconstitutional and unlawful,” Dawud said in the statement.

“MULAN NEC condemns the directive in the press release in the strongest term and urges the FCT High Court to reverse its decision contained in the press release forthwith.”

On the hijab controversy, MULAN said the constitutional provision affirmed the religious rights of citizens, and resolved to design a hijab compliant collaret with bib for use by Muslim female legal practitioners to conform with the tradition of the legal profession.

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**MAURITANIA: Force feeding
burdens obese girls with**

diabetes, heart disease

Heavier girls are deemed more beautiful and likelier to find a good husband in the West African country

By Zoe Tabary

Thomson Reuters Foundation (08.04.2018) – <https://tmsnrt.rs/2qitg9g> – When Souadou Isselmou was made to eat buckets of porridge as a child in southern Mauritania, she hated it so much she would hide food under her armpits and throw it in the toilet.

“I tried to stick it in my abaya (loose-fitting robe),” she said, fiddling with her beaded bracelets. “Sometimes I got caught, but I still managed to get rid of some food.”

When she was seven, her parents started feeding her two buckets of porridge and couscous per day “so men would want to marry me”.

“I married my cousin at the age of 13, and had my first child a year later,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at a friend’s home in Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital.

Isselmou’s case is far from uncommon. Heavier girls are deemed more beautiful and likelier to find a good husband in the West African country, say activists.

The practice of force feeding is known as gavage – a French term used to describe fattening up geese to produce foie gras, a delicacy produced from their enlarged livers.

It can leave young girls with diabetes, hypertension or heart disease for life, said Youma Mohamed, a rights activist.

Girls of around eight can weigh 140 kg (300lb) after force feeding, putting a huge strain on their hearts and jeopardising their health. Young women can tip the scales at 200 kg.

Now in her forties, Isselmou has type 2 diabetes, which is associated with obesity and lack of exercise.

Her parents used to give her zrik – a drink made of milk, water and sugar – so she would digest food faster, she recalled.

“My mother would cook an entire sheep in oil and butter, and I had to eat it all within a week,” she said, adding that she felt so heavy that she could barely walk after four months of the diet.

“I didn’t fit into any of my clothes.”

Desirable

The tradition is closely linked to child marriage because it accelerates puberty and makes younger girls appear more womanly, according to rights group Equality Now.

“Mauritanian men often see large girls and women as more desirable,” said Aminetou Mint Moctar, head of Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille, a local women’s rights charity.

“They take it as a sign of wealth and that a girl will make a good wife,” she said in emailed comments.

While drought has left many families short of food to fatten girls, some are turning to “chemical gavage”, with girls buying drugs such as corticoids – steroid hormones – to get bigger and increase their chances of marriage, activists said.

“These are pills meant for animals, which can be even more dangerous than eating too much food,” said Mint Moctar, whose organisation has called for force feeding to be criminalised.

“But you will see gavage in the rainy season, when meat and milk are plentiful.”

Although gavage still exists in rural areas, it is now less widespread in cities as working women need to be mobile so “they aren’t as interested in putting on weight”, said Mohamed.

“Having a job and earning an income allows them to stand up to their families and make their own decisions,” she said.

Although Isselmou says her parents had her best interests at heart, she never force fed her two daughters.

“It’s their bodies, not mine,” she said.

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From Myanmar to Singapore: Why the maid trafficking

continues

Despite an official ban and widespread condemnation, the trade of underage girls from Myanmar to Singapore continues to thrive.

By Lynn Lee and James Leong

Al Jazeera (02.04.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2H7LeCx> – When we first heard about a 15-year-old domestic worker from [Myanmar](#) seeking help at a shelter in [Singapore](#) in 2016, we thought it was an isolated case. But at the shelter, we met three other teenage maids from Myanmar who'd also run away from their employers. One said she'd been physically abused; another fled after her male employer asked her to take a shower with him; a third told us she'd been raped.

Why were children working in Singapore? How did they even get here? We decided to investigate.

In our [2016 documentary](#), we uncovered a thriving trade in the trafficking of underage girls from Myanmar to Singapore. We discovered that this was happening despite laws in both countries designed to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable young women.

In 2014, Myanmar banned all female citizens from leaving to become domestic workers overseas. But we learned that, in villages across the country, recruiters were still telling impoverished families their lives would improve if they let their daughters go to Singapore.

What they didn't say, of course, was that doing so was illegal and that there would be risks involved. What the agents got in return was a cut of the hefty recruitment fees the girls were obliged to pay.

According to Singapore legislation, domestic workers in the wealthy island state must be at least 23 years old. However, agents regularly bribe officials in Myanmar's Immigration Department to alter birth dates on passports, allowing them to send underage girls into the country.

Some of the girls we met were barely out of their teens, but with fake documents, they were able to avoid detection in Singapore. They told us that before leaving Myanmar, their agents would instruct them to never tell anyone their real age.

The documentary went viral both in Singapore and Myanmar. But 18 months later, we discovered that very little changed. The trafficking continues.

Young, vulnerable and alone

In 2017, we heard of a series of incidents involving domestic workers from Myanmar falling from high-rise buildings in Singapore. When we investigated, we found out that at least two cases involved teenagers and realised that, despite widespread publicity, underage girls from Myanmar were still coming to Singapore.

Over six months, we visited Myanmar multiple times and tracked down the families of two girls who'd fallen from their employers' apartments. The first girl, Wain Wain, died less than a month after arriving in Singapore. We met her family, who were clearly grieving and in shock.

Ironically, their neighbours insisted that the agent who'd recruited Wain Wain was not to blame. The same recruiter had sent at least 60 village girls to Singapore and was seen as a "benefactor" who was helping lift the community out of poverty.

"Because of them, parents can earn money. Parents let them go as we are poor," says one of the villagers who sent two of her daughters to work in Singapore. "Let's say you're an employer from Singapore; you can't come directly to us. Because of the agents, we can work there. So we are grateful to them."

The second girl, Zin Zin, was just 15 when she left for Singapore with high hopes to support her family. She returned home severely injured and will likely need long-term care.

She identified the man she said helped get her a passport with a fake date of birth as Louis Zung, a member of Myanmar's parliament and founder of a company called Myanmar Global Manpower Link, the same agency we exposed in 2016.

Zung denied he was involved in any wrongdoing. However, he

confirmed he remained a director of the company until 2016, two years after the ban on recruiting women to work overseas.

I often think about Wain Wain and her mysterious death. She allegedly committed suicide after being in Singapore for just a few weeks. Her sister can't believe it.

"She's not the type of person. She wouldn't dare. Her intention after our father died was to give our mother her own house," Wain Wain's sister told us.

It's likely we'll never know for sure what led to the tragedy. She was young, vulnerable and alone. And now she's gone.

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